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Colombian women's experiences of the Canadian refugee and asylum adjudication process

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology

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Colombian women's experiences of the Canadian refugee and asylum adjudication process

Abstract

The present thesis “Colombian women’s experiences of the Canadian refugee and asylum adjudication process” is an ethnographic description and analysis of the experiences of Colombian refugee women as they move through the refugee and asylum adjudication system in Ontario, Canada. Using concepts such as liminality, politics of waiting, hermeneutics of suspicion and arbitrariness, the refugee and asylum adjudication system is shown to be a site of power and domination that creates negative emotions in the people who face it, especially in the oral hearing as a central event in the process. Centering Colombian refugee women’s voices, their experiences and emotions are prioritized to construct a bottom-up approach that helps to understand the difficulties of being a refugee in the current moment and recent past.

Keywords

Colombian refugee women, Canada, anthropology of experience, refugee and asylum adjudication system, refugee claimants, liminality, politics of waiting, hermeneutics of suspicion, arbitrariness.

Summary for Lay Audience

The present thesis is an ethnographic description and analysis of the experiences faced by Colombian refugee women as they move through the refugee and asylum adjudication system in Ontario, Canada. Using concepts such as liminality, politics of waiting, hermeneutics of suspicion and arbitrariness, the refugee and asylum adjudication system is shown to be a site of power and domination that creates negative emotions on the people who face it, especially in the oral hearing as a central event in the process. Centering Colombian refugee women's voices, experiences and emotions are prioritized to construct a bottom-up approach that helps to understand the difficulties of the refugee adjudication process even from the beginning when they claim protection. Special attention has been paid to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, discomfort, vulnerability, and powerlessness that were common in the women's narratives that helped to understand how the process is lived from their perspective, in comparison with the mainstream works in the field that are centred on the process of decision making. This thesis also provides insight into the Colombian population in Canada, especially in Ontario, where most have immigrated through the refugee and asylum program. It also poses the question of whether what the authorities have been doing through the years to help refugees' claimants and refugees is enough.

Acknowledgments

For this thesis, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to every person who participated and helped me during the process. First and foremost, I thank the women who disinterestedly gave me their time and narrated the experiences that made this thesis possible. Second, I am grateful to the Western University Anthropology department, especially my supervisor Dr. Tania Granadillo and my adviser Dr. Kim Clark, who not only guided me through the academic process but also offered me a safe space to talk and face diverse challenges imposed by the process. Third, I thank my parents, Nely and Hernán, my uncle Andrés and my grandparents Julio and Cecilia for the love and care during every step of my life. This thesis and achievement would not have been possible without them and their efforts. Fourth, I thank my friends Luis, Ibtesum, Kenamy, Javier and Zsofía, for making my life happier and being with me during this process. Finally, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Adriana Premat and my partner Daniel Achig-Aranha. They not only guided me and accompanied me in the process but also taught me to believe in myself. Thank you for not letting me give up, for the long nights helping me to think, and for the long days being present just in case I needed something. I really hope someday I can pay you back.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For Colombian women refugees in Canada, their experiences of asylum have been shaped by the refugee and asylum adjudication system: a process that determines who is worthy to be declared a refugee or protected person under Canadian legislation and therefore be resettled. This process is only for people who come to the country whether as tourists and then claim for refugee status inland or for those who cross the Canadian-US border and ask for protection. Those who have been selected under the humanitarian and resettlement program do not need to face this process because they have already been declared refugees by a nation state or by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), especially if the place where they are coming from is a refugee camp or places where there are situations of high intensity conflict. In this context, and despite the fact that Colombia has faced the oldest armed conflict of the Western hemisphere, the number of people who reach Canada under this program is fewer than the number of refugee claimants that, year after year, through the borders or inland, position Colombia as one of the top countries from which people arrive asking for protection. For instance, in the year 2021, there were 2,476 claims resolved and 3,665 more still pending (I. and R. B. of Canada 2021). These numbers suggest that the refugee and asylum adjudication process is central in the experiences of many Colombian people shaping their lives, time, decisions and experiences. This thesis research, therefore, is focused on listening to those experiences to build a common narrative of how the process is lived from a bottom-up approach, especially among women who, because of their gender, may have different encounters and perspectives of the process.

In this sense, the following thesis will recover the narratives of Colombian women refugees in Canada who went through the refugee and asylum adjudication process and who, due to their gender identity combined with other factors such as ethnic background,

skin colour, class and education level might experience the process differently than their male or non-binary counterparts. In this first chapter, the reader can find: the central concepts and differences between Refugees and Asylum seekers, the rationale of the thesis and the narratives, the positionality of the author, the literature review used to build the theoretical framework and the methodology carried out. In the second chapter, the reader can find the context of both countries that form part of this research: Canada as a country that receives refugees and Colombia as the country from which the women had to flee. The third chapter consists of ethnographic description, where the reader will learn about the process of claiming refugee status and the experience of being a refugee claimant. The final chapter is the analysis of this process through the lens of the anthropological approaches presented. The reader will find concepts such as liminality, the politics of time, among others. Special attention is also paid to the women's emotions and feelings, which can help the reader not only to navigate through the experience, but also to understand how the Colombian refugee women feel as they go through the refugee and adjudication process.

Conceptual differences between Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Refugee Claimants

Due to multiple political, economic and climate conflicts during the last two decades, there are currently 82.4 million people around the world who were forcibly displaced (UNHCR, 2019). In order to take actions and assign responsibilities, the international community has created some categories such as refugees and asylum seekers, to establish their new legal status, rights and duties in the displacement period. In that way, international law defines refugees as a person with:

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country

of his nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR 2010:14).

Because not everyone who has faced persecution can be declared a refugee, there are specific procedures within the nation states to classify someone into that category and their status must be recognized by every country that had signed and ratified the 1951 refugee convention and its protocol in 1961. In some cases, the gravity and duration of a humanitarian crisis can compel governments to grant people this classification without any extra legal procedures, which is the case of communities living in refugee camps or societies affected by global-scale conflicts. However, in most cases people have to go through a process that administers their status as a refugee. In Canada, this is the refugee and asylum adjudication system and determines who requires protection. According to the Canadian Council for Refugees:

Asylum seekers are defined as: a person who is seeking asylum and until a determination is made, it is impossible to say whether the asylum-seeker is a refugee. Refugee is a person who is forced to flee from persecution. Refugee claimant is a person who has made a claim for protection as a refugee. This term is more or less equivalent to asylum-seeker and is standard in Canada, while asylum-seeker is the term more often used internationally. Likewise, Protected person term refers to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, a person who has been determined by Canada to be either (a) a Convention Refugee or (b) a person in need of protection (i.e., a person who may not meet the Convention

definition but is in a refugee-like situation defined in Canadian law as deserving of protection, for example because they are in danger of being tortured) (Canadian Council for Refugees 2010).

The entities in charge of determining who is a refugee are the nation states. Within the limits of their sovereignty, they are authorized to grant legal status to their inhabitants and those who live in their territory. Therefore, they must be the entities able to determine whether someone can be a refugee or not. Each state has developed specific mechanisms and procedures for establishing reliable asylum demands and for granting rights and duties to those who have been accepted as refugees. As a result of the modern global system, some of the “host” countries belong to the commonly called “Global North”¹ and have adapted their legal, political and economic systems to the reception and resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers, who in most cases are living within the country waiting for an answer to their protection claims. Some nation states have more conservative and protectionist visions, rejecting petitions of refugees constantly, while others have more progressive and open programs as a way both to grant human rights worldwide, and to increase their workforce, improving their economic strength.

This latter is the case of Canada, a country that traditionally has been associated in the international community as a human rights guarantor and recipient of refugees. Since World War II, Canada has been recognized as a role model for humanitarian help and its refugee and asylum adjudication system is one of “the finest refugee protection regimes

¹ The notion of Global North and Global South have been coined by different social science scholars to distinguish the economic powers (wealth and privilege) of the industrialized countries over the rest. The term was first used as a contrast between “core” and “periphery” referring to the colonial powers. However, over time the “south/north” terminology has become widespread as a way to understand different process of colonialism, imperialism, etc. See Immanuel Wallerstein (2004), Anibal Quijano (2000), among others.

in the world” (Rana Khan 2020: 1), being described as highly objective, fair and very humanitarian with multiple resettlement programs that have welcomed 23,540 people during 2021. However, the system is far from being perfect, and as many have argued (Kelley and Ninette,2000), it has been plagued by different biases and ideologies through time. Depending on the economic and political context in the world and the political agendas of the government in power, Canadian immigration and refugee policies have fluctuated from very conservative positions to more open and progressive ones.

Significance of this research

The importance of studying the experiences of Colombian women refugees in Canada from an anthropological perspective is to obtain a common narrative from a bottom-up approach of how Colombian people experience the refugee and asylum adjudication process in Canada and, with that information, to contest hegemonic narratives about the fairness and objectives of the system. Along the way, a narrative is built that helps to demonstrate that no one has chosen freely to become a refugee, and the process people face after fleeing their country is far from easy and, in many cases, can be a traumatic experience due to the lack of stability, support and settlement.

Similarly, the significance of doing this study with the Colombian population is due to the increased number of Colombian claims during the last two decades, as Colombia became one of the top countries in the world and second in the Americas -- after Mexico -- to ask for protection in Canada, reflecting the deep economic and political problems of the country despite the attempted peace processes, fiscal growth and opening of the political system.

In this context, Anthropology, as a discipline that privileges people’s experiences, offers a valuable tool to explore and recognize those journeys and contest the hegemonic

narratives that have been built around refugee claimants and the refugee and asylum adjudication system; especially in a country like Canada, where refugee policies are essential to its immigration system, economic growth, and multicultural society.

The importance of the narratives

Rather than being only an institutional process, the refugee and asylum adjudication system is an experience. People who face it have plenty of stories of their own feelings, the reasons they had to use this system, and their opinions regarding its fairness. People's narratives help not only to create a complex vision of the process where there are multiple agents and subjectivities but also to provide a bottom-up approach, where the dominant narrative is disputed by particular experiences of navigating through the process and how it must be reshaped in order to achieve its final goal of protection and safety regardless of class, gender, or ethnic origin. In this way, the thesis aims to dispute the hegemonic narrative of fairness and objectivity and provide a voice to those who endure the process but, due to their position of liminal personas, are not listened to.

According to Turner (1986: 3), following Wilhelm Dilthey's approach, experience refers to "what has been lived through," therefore it is a lived process that all human beings can relate to at every step of their lives, in order to establish and make sense of their reality. In other words, experience is the cornerstone of life: past, present, and future are experienced representations that provide meaning to existence. This meaning is always mediated by culture, which not only interprets the experiences but also provides channels of communication to portray them. "Experience is, at one and the same time, illustrative of what individuals do and of the conventional patterns of culturally learned and interpreted behaviour that makes them understandable to others" (Turner and Bruner 1986:49). In this way, culture imposes meaning on experiences and opens a route to

transmit them to others in order to build consensus, learning and common narratives about how reality must be.

Doubtlessly, experiences are central to culture and society, and both can be studied through narratives and stories of events, happenings, and encounters. Anthropology, as a discipline that studies the human being, is aware of that and reclaims the importance of experience in its theoretical framework. The anthropology of experience is thus “the study of how individuals actually experience their culture, that is how events are received by consciousness” (Turner and Bruner 1986:5). In this way, using this premise as a goal and method, anthropology can address any kind of human process of the same phenomenon. Dorothy Smith (2005) also emphasizes the importance of people's voices as a method of inquiry to acknowledge social relations and social institutions. In this case, the refugee and asylum adjudication system are a combination of multiple experiences, social and institutional processes and agents such as fleeing from home, facing new societies, new norms, new institutions, becoming a liminal persona, enduring an oral hearing, and finally integrating with a different culture; journeys that can only be understood if people who have faced these experiences are allowed to narrate and explain them.

That is why the narrative becomes an essential part of the experience. It is through the narrative that it is possible to know experiences and therefore learn from them. When people talk about why they must flee from their home country, how they are treated by the host society, how they felt during the hearing, or how much they miss their families and friends left behind, they are not only narrating their experiences but they are also showing how an institutional process works, they are proving if the international humanitarian systems are trustworthy, if the world has actually overcome debates about racism and xenophobia in the way they are treated, and if the current neoliberal

globalization has improved the living conditions for everyone as was proposed by its exponents a few years ago.

In this sense, experiences and, therefore, their narratives are the living proof of the daily events that people must face. They are, in other words, the living dispute of hegemonic worldviews which claim that the global system is equitable, and state institutions work with objectivity and fairness. "The importance of dominant narratives is that they become the major interpretative devices to organize and communicate experiences; however, they remain largely unexamined" (Turner and Bruner 1986:18). Along with every social relation, narratives are also crossed by power relations that define what truth is and what it is not. Therefore, personal experiences challenge these narratives and place the reality in a common sphere where everyone can participate and contribute.

In this regard, Jackson (2013:32) following Hannah Arendt's standpoint, argues that narrative, and specifically storytelling, is an essential strategy for transforming the private into public meanings, turning the experiences into a place to dispute power:

Although Hannah Arendt emphasizes the power of storytelling to connect us with others, find common ground and reclaim a public world, there can be no doubt that she placed equal value on those who embraced the role of "conscious pariah" and spoke out against ideologies that enshrined the vested interests of power elites.

In this way, the experiences of people facing the refugee and asylum adjudication system challenge the common nation state narrative regarding refugees and asylum seekers as either victims or as bogus claimants.

In this narrative, both images imply negative connotations of people that place them either as aid recipients, which erases their agency, or as abusive people who take

advantage of the favourable conditions of the system. As Habermas argues, "the lifeworld and voices of marginalized classes also tend to be privatized by being denied public recognition" (as cited in Jackson 2013:32), confirming the importance of dissident narratives not only in disputing the meaning and power of hegemonic stories but also in showing that what has been accepted as reality is false and must be changed. "Power is not a simple manipulation of the media. It depends on what most people are predisposed to accept and what they consider appropriate and legitimate" (Turner and Bruner 1986:19).

Additionally, to the resistance point, narrative and storytelling from the standpoint of experiences offer another powerful tool for society: the possibility of empowerment through a mechanism of coping. "Storytelling is a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowerment circumstances" (Jackson 2013:34). As a coping instrument, the narrative becomes a restorative praxis where people can communicate their journeys and find either a sense of agency in them or communal constructions of life.

As social beings by nature, humans search for other common points where they can start to build social relations. The modern nation state has been doing this examination as the cornerstone of its existence, whether through arguments about consanguinity, a common past, linguistic similarity, or future goals. The idea of a nation is based on everyone being cast in the same mold. However, these similarities also create differences and what identifies a group also makes it distinct: this is how modern societies trace an "us" and "them." Nonetheless, there is a human condition that is similar for everyone: suffering and vulnerability. Narrating experiences of trauma can create social bonds strengthening communities. Butler, in her blog *Rethinking Vulnerability, Violence, Resistance* argues

for the importance of recognizing one's own vulnerability as the only possible way to create true social connections of resistance.

Indeed, vulnerability traverses and conditions social relations, and without that insight, we stand little chance of achieving the sort of substantive equality that is desired. Vulnerability ought not to be identified exclusively with passivity; it makes sense only in light of an embodied set of social relations, including practices of resistance. A view of vulnerability as part of embodied social relations and actions can help us understand how and why forms of resistance emerge as they do. (Butler 2020).

In this sense, storytelling proposes a unique attempt to create social cohesion in a community. A dialectical operation between experiences and narratives that find their way to build a world less dangerous for everyone. "Stories thus disclose not just 'who' we are, but 'what' we have in common with others, not just 'who' we think we are but 'what' shared circumstances bear upon our lives and our fate" (Jackson 2013:15).

Storytelling also creates conditions to understand negative experiences and emotions and therefore transform the way people are related to them. Once people are free to speak, they are free to liberate what has been kept in silence, in the forbidden terrain. Jackson (2013:17) reflects on this matter, "storytelling counters the arbitrariness of existence; it allows one the freedom to articulate the tragedy of one's situation in one's words", making it a liberating practice that helps to improve the conditions of human lives.

In this regard, storytelling not only emerges as an attempt to cope and overpass traumatic situations (similar to a psychoanalytic therapy recognition) but also to dispute in the public terrain hidden identities that have been denied the basic rights of recognition. This is another form of empowerment that attempts to overpass structural inequalities: when

there is “structural indifference, endemic oppression and sense of abjection that can make a person feel as though he or she is a mere object, nameless, of no account, ground down, in a “world where agency seems to be entirely in the hands of others” (Jackson 2013:61). This is similar to refugee claimants who are people living in liminal stages outside of society where they are predetermined to coexist with uncertainty, suspiciousness, and powerlessness.

This “identity” is also reinforced in the “Hearing,” which, as the most important step of the refugee and asylum adjudication system, is saturated with hegemonic narratives about asylum claimants’ race, ethnicity, background, country of origin, gender and age, that can lead to prejudice against them and affect the result of their claims. In this sense, the power of narratives and storytelling plays a fundamental role in changing these perspectives, reducing the homogenization of populations and looking at each person in their singularity. This can contribute to achieving fair decisions and salvaging lives.

In summary, the importance of experiences translated into narratives and storytelling offers an essential proposal of change and empowerment. In the case of asylum seekers, their experiences navigating the refugee and asylum adjudication system confront and contradict the hegemonic narratives that not only assert the efficiency and fairness of the system, but also erase their particularities by depicting them as an undesirable mass of people who are either recipients of generous aid or are trying to cheat and take advantage of the system. Storytelling also empowers them after their traumatic experiences of fleeing from home and resettling in a new society that has institutional mechanisms to exclude and silence them.

Narratives of their experiences provide asylum seekers with recognition. They place their life stories in the public domain and grant forms of empowerment. They also function as a coping mechanism due to their potential to find common places of vulnerability and

thus strengthen social bonds. Their experiences depict not only their past but also display the agency that has been part of their journeys. As Beckett argues, “stories are narratives that seek to capture the emotional experiences people have as they live their lives” (Beckett 2020:14). In that sense, the narrative is key to how we make sense of our lives. For refugee claimants, therefore, their narratives work to make sense of the new reality they must face and the old one that they left behind and that, from the perspective of the present, looks very far away.

Positionality

This research is informed by my own experience in recent years. I personally faced the refugee and asylum adjudication process and experienced all of the feelings and emotions described by the participants in this research. The main personal motivation for this research was to fully understand what I and my family lived through, using the resources that anthropological knowledge can offer and using my own experiences combined with those of the women to provide my own understanding and description of the process.

In this sense, as a Colombian woman who lived the process, the main motivation of this research was to sketch out the game of power that is performed during the refugee and asylum adjudication process and consider how the worldwide system of refugee protection must expand its horizons to address new realities of displacement.

Literature review

In order to provide meaningful and theoretical support to the experiences of Colombian women refugees in Canada, especially from an anthropological perspective, the literature review was conducted with analytical approaches from the social sciences regarding three core points of the research: (i) the refugee and asylum adjudication process, especially the oral hearing where the hermeneutics of suspicion and arbitrariness are depicted; (ii) the

politics of waiting; and (iii) the liminal state that people labeled as refugee claimants face during the process. Special attention has also focused on the politics of storytelling and narratives during the hearing and ethical witnessing. Literature related to the anthropology of the state was also consulted, which helps to elucidate the bureaucratic practices and processes that shape the relationship between people and the nation state.

The refugee and asylum adjudication process, especially in Canada, has been documented mainly in the field of political science, focusing especially on the decision-making process in the courtroom – see among others, Barutciski (2012) Colaiacovo (2013), Lawrance and Ruffer (2015), Rehaag (2007), and Tomkinson (2018). These studies have depicted the interactions among adjudicators, lawyers or representatives and claimants, especially regarding the subjective parameters in each approval or rejection. Colaiacovo (2013), for example, explores existent bias during the hearing process and the final decision depending on the gender, ethnicity, educational level and previous work of each adjudicator. Rehaag (2008) explores the prejudice related to the background and origin of the claimant and how some countries have a higher rate of acceptance over others even though the political and economic crisis seems to be similar. Lawrance and Ruffer (2012) examine the controversial nature of the process and the role of lawyers and representatives in the final decision. They also argue that the experience of testimony without an ethical witnessing revictimizes the claimant, turning the hearing into a dehumanizing step for the refugee. These studies provide useful elements to understand the process and provide legal and historical background about the system and how it works. However, all of these works are from state agents' perspectives and how the process is seen by the decision makers. Therefore, the narratives of the people who had to navigate this system are not represented.

The second main point refers to the politics of waiting. As the refugee and asylum adjudication process is a procedure created and controlled by the nation state, time becomes an expression of its power, specifically the waiting to which refugee claimants are subjected during the whole process. The politics of waiting is studied mainly by Auyero (2012) and Janeja Manpreet K. and Andreas (2018) from sociological and anthropological perspectives, where the former argues time is an exercise of power and domination, while the latter supports this approach but also offer a new possibility of resistance and social organization during the waiting period. Both works rely on the theoretical contribution of Bourdieu (2000) regarding time, social being and the sense of existence. In this sense, both works are fundamental to understanding the process and the experiences of refugee claimants which are mainly plagued by unknown waiting times.

The third central concept is the anthropological concept of liminality. Adopting the classical works of Turner (1970) and Van Gennep (1908) to immigration and refugee studies, authors such as Alkhaled and Sasaki (2021), Arvanitis, Yelland, and Kiprianos (2019), Clandinin (2000), Hartonen et al. (2021), and Gold (2019) use the concept of liminality to provide insight into the personal stage that refugees and especially asylum claimants face in regard to the nation state. All of these authors explore the power dynamics of the nation state over stateless people. These works are also based on perspectives such as homo sacer, sovereign power and bare life by Giorgio Agamben (1998), biopolitics by Foucault (1979), and necro-politics (the politics of death) by Achille Mbembe (2019) which helps to understand the macro-structural system of how every forced displacement is connected to capitalism and power worldwide. Necro-politics as the reason why people from the south must flee, and Biopolitics as the control of bodies and lives in the North. Estévez (2018) builds a theoretical framework of refugees from the global south arguing how the race criteria impacts the decisions over their refugee claims. In that way, the analytical approach of liminality becomes a central

core to understanding not only the bureaucratic process of claiming refugee status but also navigating its multiple processes, encounters, and power relations.

For the politics of storytelling, narrative and experiences, the literature comes from different social approaches, including sociology, anthropology, feminist and gender studies and trauma studies. Razack (1993), for example, argues for the importance of storytelling in building non-hegemonic narratives and creating social cohesion in a community. Trauma and testimony studies by Burstow (2003), Laub (1992), Miller (2005), Uy et al (2018) and Yuki (2018), foreground the ethical dilemmas around witnessing, listening, and transmitting oral stories. This approach is especially useful in a power space such as the hearing that may revictimize the claimants for not having ethical witnessing. Jackson (2013) supports the approach of storytelling as a counter-hegemonic narrative that works not only as a social connector but also as a coping mechanism. In the classic anthropology of experience approach, Bruner (1896) and Turner (1982) argue it is only through experiences that we are able to meet and understand people's culture and beliefs. As a human condition, experiences become a result and research method. Under this premise, Clandinin (2000) explores narratives as a method and technique for qualitative research, arguing that reality can only be known through people's voices. A similar argument is put forward by Dorothy Smith (2005) through Institutional Ethnography, where people's voices are essential to transforming the objects of the study into subjects. These approaches are essential for adopting a bottom-up approach regarding migration patterns and refugee procedures, which often are studied only through the lenses of the nation state and policy makers, thereby homogenizing the perspectives and experiences of migrants and refugees. In contrast, this study adopts a more anthropological perspective based on women's actual experiences, bringing to the study their own voices, perceptions, and interpretations of their refugee claimant experience.

Finally, there are important contributions from the anthropology of the state literature, particularly about bureaucratic processes where people are engaged with state representatives. Gupta (2012) provides an understanding of the written nature of the state and its importance for records and backups of its bureaucratic processes. This provides a theoretical framework to understand the importance of the written narrative that refugee claimants must present before the hearing. Finally, the borders literature such as Wilson and Donnan (2012) and van Houtum (2010) was also incorporated into the description of the Canadian border and the requirements for claiming refugee status in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the U.S.

Other important contributions are Epp (2017), Grupo de Memoria Histórica (2010), Grasa (2020), Knowles (2016), Lyon (1978), Ninette (2000), Nijboer (2002), Rana Khan (2020), Riaño Alcalá et al (2008), Uribe Alarcon (2018), and Wei (2002) for the Canadian and Colombian context and history, showing the close relationship of both countries in matters of refugees and humanitarian aid. Those documents allowed me to build an historic context to understand the current Colombian displacement and why Canada is the selected destination for many of them.

In summary, this literature review was used to create a theoretical background for the narratives of Colombian women refugees in Canada. Combining perspectives from different social sciences helps to elucidate how these women navigated the refugee and asylum adjudication process. What this thesis presents is an understanding of the refugee and adjudication system assembled through the experiences of claimants, specifically from women. It is a contrast between theory and reality, using the former to illuminate the latter, instead of trying to make the facts fit the theoretical presuppositions.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this research project was carried out from July to October of 2021. The primary research method was semi-structured interviews with ten women living in the province of Ontario, mainly in London, Kitchener, and St Thomas. Due to the social restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, seven interviews were conducted face-to-face in public and open spaces, while three were online through the Zoom platform. Alternative methods were participant observation of social media, especially social networks such as Facebook groups, and gatherings of Latin American people in different spaces such as workshops, festivals, and celebrations of national holidays.² At the beginning of the project, I contemplated carrying out participant observation in an NGO that works closely with the Latin American population, however due to a differences in political alignments with the organization executives, I decided not to continue with the data collection at that site.

The research participants were Colombian women who arrived in Canada as asylum seekers. There was only one male participant who is the partner of one of the interviewed women and who was present at the moment of the conversation. Similarly, during four interviews, the daughters and/or granddaughters of the research participant were present, either participating in the conversation or providing new information about the journey of their parents or grandparents.

The age range of the women was between thirty-five and sixty-three years old. The date of arrival to Canada ranged from twenty-two to two years ago. This range provided different and valuable perspectives regarding both the refugee and asylum adjudication

² The two national Colombian holidays are on July 20th and August 7th.

process at different historical moments and the resettlement and integration journey. Concerning the process, eight of them were the main applicant of the case, and in the reimagining two, it was their husband. Among the women, only one spoke English before coming to Canada, four learned it during the integration process, and five are still learning and improving their communicative skills. Similarly, seven of them have a bachelor's degree in Colombia and two of them a Master's in Canada. Every participant selected a pseudonym that not only protected their identity, but also worked as an element of self-identification. See the summary of participants' information in Table 1.

The data collection was centered on three main points: the process for claiming refugee status, the hearing as the core of the experience, and the process of integration. Each interview lasted an average of one hour and ten minutes and was audio recorded. I also took notes about relevant elements in their experiences. Some women expressed gratitude for the opportunity to tell stories that they had never been able to speak about.

Coding the data was a four-step process. First, I transcribed the interviews from the records into a Word document. The translations of each interview were done by me being very careful to capture the same meaning and context that was expressed in Spanish. Second, I used a Microsoft Excel table to categorize the three main points of the experiences -- arrival, hearing and resettlement -- and I assigned a colour to each. Third, using the same colours, I coded the information on the interviews and Word documents focusing on the emotions, feelings and interactions experienced throughout the process.

The data analysis based on qualitative examination drew on anthropological perspectives, especially a bottom-up approach that provided key ideas to the experience. The concepts of politics of storytelling, narratives and the anthropology of experience were used as a common thread to build the argument in chapters three and four. Similarly, concepts such as liminality and limbo stage, politics of waiting, uncertainty, powerlessness,

arbitrariness, power, and domination, among others, provide an excellent resource not only to understand the processes and narratives, but also to locate the asylum claimant system as a modern anthropological experience.

Additionally, there were a few mixed methods analyses (quantitative/qualitative) regarding the statistics of the refugee and asylum seeker Colombian population. The statistics of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) on their website, where there is information about the year, number of claimants and the final decision, as well as data from the open government portal, were useful to understand waves of refugee claimants, the applications accepted and denied, and the places where people usually resettle.

The writing process was centered on three main points as well: first, the historical and political context of both Canadian and Colombian states regarding refugee policies and why one is a receiver and the other a sender of refugees; second, the women's lived experiences description from their claim for refugee status through to their integration and resettlement process; and finally, the analysis of their experiences using anthropological approaches and theories.

For that reason, to answer the question of how Colombian refugee women experienced the refugee and asylum adjudication process in Canada, this thesis is divided in three core chapters that will provide an explanation for each fragment of the question. In the next chapter there will be an historical context of both countries, Canada and Colombia, and how they became a recipient and issuer of refugees respectively. There is also a context of their relationship and history over time regarding refugees that will help to illuminate how since the start of the twenty-first century Canada has played an important role resettling Colombian people. Chapter three is focused on the women's experiences through the process. It is an ethnographic and descriptive section where the women

themselves narrate the steps that they had to face in their experiences claiming refugee status, showing their feelings, thoughts, and their explanations of the process. While this chapter includes some analysis of their comments, the main analysis will be in chapter four where, using anthropological approaches, I will try to elucidate the process and the women's feelings about it. That chapter is followed by the conclusions and women's recommendations, offered in response to a question about what they would say to other women who were going through the same process. To sum up the content of this introductory chapter, it set out the literature review that was carried out to answer the research question, a conceptual framework about refugees and asylum seekers, the methodology used, and as in every anthropological research project the importance of this question for the academy and the society in general, accompanied by the positionality of the researcher in relation to the topic.

Table 1 Participants' information

Interview No.	Pseudonym	Date of Arrival in Canada	Hearing Date and Time from Arrival	Main applicant
1	Piedad	October 2004 (17 years ago)	Sometime in 2005 (1 year approx.)	Herself
2	Lucía	August 2017 (4 years ago)	December 2018 (16 months) 5 failed calls	Herself
3	Jenny	September 2010 (11 years ago)	Sometime in 2013 (3 years approx.)	Her Husband
4	María	December 2017 (5 years ago)	February 2018 (1.5 months)	Herself
5	Patricia	December 2011 (10 years ago)	December 2012 (1 year approx.)	Her Husband
6	Luciana	September 2017 (4 years ago)	December 2017 (4 months)	Herself
7	Rosa	November 2018 (3 years ago)	September 2019 (10 months)	Herself
8	Teresa	June 2000 (21 years ago)	December 2001 (1.5 years approx.)	Herself
9	Valentina	January 1999 (22 years ago)	2000 (1 year approx.)	Herself
10	Girasol	October 2019 (2 years ago)	August 2021 (2 years) 1 failed call.	Herself

Chapter 2: Canadian and Colombian background

In this chapter, I provide information that will help place in context the stories I present in later chapters. First, I give an overview of Canada's refugee and migration policies over the years, paying particular attention to how racial bias has influenced who was granted the right to live in Canada. Second, I outline the political and historical factors that explain the influx of refugees from Colombia into Canada. Third, I go over the Colombia-Canada relationship with a special focus on asylum claimants and refugees' patterns from 2000 on.

The history of refugee policies in Canada

Despite the worldwide presumption of Canada as an open and humanitarian country in resettling refugees, refugee and migration policies have varied through the years depending on the government's political and economic agendas, dominant racial bias and international events like wars.

From the beginning, the Canadian government's dealing with displaced populations betrayed racial biases. While Canada privileged displaced populations of European background (e.g., the loyalists that came during the U.S. revolutionary war, the Irish who fled the potato famine in the mid-1800s, and religious refugees from Russia in the 1800s), it discriminated against the Chinese, charging them a "head tax" of 50 dollars to enter the country.³

³ See the Chinese Head Tax Exclusion Act in 1885 (McRae 2022).

During World War I, Canada granted refuge primarily to people of British background, discriminating against people of Jewish and Asian descent. The situation remained the same during World War II. Then, as Epp (2017:7) describes:

Not only did the government take a passive response to the crisis, but it also raised the capital requirement for Jewish immigrants (who were in essence 'refugees' at this time) from \$5,000 to \$20,000 and denied admission for other reasons to those with sufficient funds.

The post-war period brought important changes that affected the fate of displaced populations around the world. In 1945, the United Nations (UN) was created and in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed. This declaration established life and security as inalienable rights and created the pathway for the creation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent Protocol in 1967. As Kelley and Ninette explain (2000:17), "the strong performance of the postwar economy favoured the opening-up of Canadian immigration policy" and resulted in "the admission of more diverse groups of immigrants."

In 1962, Canada's immigration policies became less explicit about racial and ethnic discrimination as the government turned to skills and income level as key criteria for acceptance.⁴ The new requirements established the legal foundation of the current immigration policy and enacted the idea of a multicultural country.

In 1976, Canada created a new Immigration and Refugee Act incorporating the new acceptance criteria for immigration and the legal distinctions between refugees and

⁴ Discriminatory policies still remained until 1967 for Asian immigrants (see Rana Khan 2020).

immigrants. Among refugee policies, the new act established different procedures depending on the form of entry to Canada. For asylum seekers, the first refugee and asylum adjudication system was established, while for humanitarian resettlement or government assisted refugees the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) was created, which allowed private institutions and non-governmental groups to bring to Canada people living in refugee camps or in extreme conflict situations. In both cases economic and social assistance was also incorporated to help during their integration process. Similarly, in 1987 the Women at Risk Program (WAR) was launched, which focused on the special needs of refugee women.

As a result of these new policies Canada was recognized worldwide as a human rights protector and awarded with the Fridtjof Nansen Medal by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, this award was highly criticized by Canadian non-governmental institutions dedicated to work with refugees who pointed out low international standards and race prejudice in Canada over refugee eligibility.

“Although Canada claimed to have a colour-blind immigration policy during this era, the restrictive stance towards African refugees suffers in comparison to the more generous approach to displaced white Europeans” (Epp 2017:22).

In 1989, the refugee and asylum adjudication system were reinforced with the creation of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), tasked with calling in-person hearings and providing the opportunity for people to defend their claims as a result of the landmark “Singh” decision.⁵

⁵ The case refers to seven different people sharing the last name “Singh” who got denied their refugee claims by the federal government in 1977. None of them had the opportunity of an oral defense. The case was resolved by the Supreme Court that declared everybody in the Canadian territory regardless of their legal

In the decade of 2000, international policies changed abruptly. In the aftermath of 9/11, there was a focus on national security as a priority. In Canada in 2002 a new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) was launched, which is essentially the current immigration law. The new act increased and reinforced border security policies, as a result bringing into effect the Canada-US safe third country agreement,⁶ and also creating the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) with responsibility for detentions and removals.

Among the new refugee policies, the new act created the Refugee Protection Division (RDP) as a part of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) responsible for the hearings and decisions over the refugee claims. It established new and specialized mechanisms to help in determining the eligibility of claims. For instance, the designated countries list defined “safe” countries and invalidated claims from those places.

In 2012, the Refugee Appeal Division (RAD) was implemented as a second instance for denied claims. Even though it was established in the 2002 IRPA its formal creation was ten years later; there are exceptions for applying which makes the appeal process not equally available to everyone.

Currently, the 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) still regulates every refugee and immigration policy. In matters of refugees, specifically refugee claimants, the entities created are still responsible for the adjudication process. Every woman

status was protected by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The case was called *Singh v. Minister of Employment and Immigration*. See Foot (2021)

⁶ The agreement stipulates that anyone applying for refugee protection at a Canadian border is not eligible if the first country of arrival was the U.S. (considered a safe country in this law), even if it was used just as a pathway to arrive in Canada, with a few exceptions. Despite the fact that this agreement has been highly criticized, in 2021 it was again ratified by Parliament.

interviewed related having contact with two or more of those entities and being exposed to their regulations and agendas.

To conclude, even though time and circumstances have changed, and policies have been modified, over the years Canada's immigration and refugee policies have been influenced by political and economic agendas, racist bias and international events. These structural elements shape immigration and refugee experiences because it is through them that decisions are made about who is worthy to enter and stay in the country. As Valerie Knowles (2016:7) quoting Richard Tait has highlighted: "A hundred years from now, I don't suppose people will care all that much whether we legalize marijuana or not. But decisions about who you let into Canada will decide the kind of country we have 100 years from now."

Colombian context

The influx of refugees from Colombia to countries around the world can be tracked to economic and political root problems such as ongoing conflicts over the use and distribution of the land, the closed political system controlled by national and provincial elites, the economic agendas imposed by other countries, and more recently drug trafficking. These processes have led to radicalized political violence in Colombia, resulting in the longest armed conflict in the Western hemisphere. This in turn has led to atrocious war crimes such as targeted murders, massacres, forced disappearance and kidnapping, extortion, sexual violence, forced recruitment, armed attacks on civilians, land mines, sabotage to private property, terrorist attacks, threats and internal and

external forced displacement.⁷ Below I describe the historical roots of the conflict and how it has influenced people's decisions to flee. I provide an overview of the conflict history through the years focusing on the period of 1999-2022, which encompasses the time period during which my interviewees had to flee Colombia.

There is no agreement on when the Colombian armed conflict started. Some scholars such as Molano (2014) situate it in 1946 with bipartisan violence, while others like Fajardo, Giraldo and Zubiria, (2014) identify the 1920s and 30s as the key period, with failed agrarian reforms and preliminary outbreaks of violence. However, all of them agree that disputes over the use and possession of land is the oldest and principal cause of the armed conflict, in conjunction with the closed political system controlled solely by a few families.

This situation led to the creation between 1948 and 1958 of the first rural guerrilla groups fighting for a fair distribution of land, which over time developed into the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP). During this time, political participation was also limited, and formal political participation was restricted only to the two traditional political parties, leading to the radicalization of dissident groups.

⁷ According to the National Center for Historical Memory --Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación Colombia (2013) -- between 1958 and 2012, there were around 220,000 murder victims, 25,007 missing people (desaparecidos), 1,754 sexual violence victims, 6,421 children recruited by the armed groups, and 4,744,046 displaced people. The main participants in the conflict can be categorized as guerrillas (FARC-EP, ELN, and the demobilized groups, EPL, M-19), paramilitary groups (AUC and its different branches), and finally the military forces of the state which often worked together with the paramilitary groups.

The international context during the Cold War prompted the creation of more guerrilla groups. The National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, ELN) and the Popular Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Popular, EPL) were movements looking for independence and freedom from dominant countries, especially policies imposed by the U.S. in Latin America.

At the end of the 1970s and middle of the 80s a new phenomenon emerged that was going to change national and international agendas. The fuel for the armed conflict was drug trafficking that, combined with the structural problems, ruled the political and economic agendas during the last years of the 20th century. Associated with drug trafficking came the appearance of new armed actors such as the paramilitary groups in 1982 which at the beginning were at the service of elites, the military forces and drug cartels. The old problems in the use and distribution of land were increased due to the urge to possess and control illicit drug crops and in the political system the violence was radicalized.⁸ The drug actors also permeated the government sphere turning the country into a narco-state, when most of the politicians participated in the drug trafficking or benefitted financially from it (Puche Diaz 2011).

In 1991 a new constitution was instituted to guarantee human rights and ensure the decentralization of the political system and economy. As the state withdrew from the countryside, paramilitary groups and guerrilla groups took over with disastrous effects on the civilian population who often became the target of attacks by both armed groups.

⁸ See the UP (Unión Patriótica) genocide that killed systematically members of a political party. The survivors are still in exile (Cepeda 2006).

After a failed peace process in the first decade of this century, there was a territorial expansion of the armed groups. The FARC-EP took the south of the country, and the paramilitary groups took the north, increasing the disputes over the control of territories. This situation put the state in a position where it felt the need to increase its military offensive to reassume its monopoly on the use of force. Similarly, the new international agenda in the aftermath of 9/11 changed the vision of the conflict, where the armed groups were no longer considered to have political aspirations, identifying them instead as falling under the terrorist category, thus undermining any negotiated exit from the conflict. This was the most violent period of the conflict (Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación Colombia 2013).

Between 2002 and 2010 there was an important military offensive against the guerrilla groups and a demobilization process of paramilitary groups. However, it was not the end for these groups, as they adjusted to the new conditions and continued targeting civil populations. Similarly, there was an increase in taxes and state contributions to support the war and a reduction of public services, decreasing the living conditions of the citizens. The world economic crisis also affected the country; the public spending was minimal, increasing poverty and the wealth gap. Similarly, the new market demands such as mining exploitation and agro-industrial expansion were also causes of forced displacement and the expansion of the conflict through the rest of the country.

In 2010, there was a new government with a stated intention to provide a negotiated and pacific end of the conflict, specifically with the guerrilla group FARC-EP. From 2010 to 2014, a common agenda was negotiated between the government and the guerrillas and from 2014 to 2016 a formal negotiation period was established. The peace process took six years to be negotiated, while the conflict was still ongoing, generating new waves of violence against the civil population, especially in the countryside.

In 2016, despite relentless opposition by some local and regional elites, the peace agreement was finally signed. Its main goal was victim reparations, however, it also tried to offset the historical root causes of the armed conflict: the use and distribution of land, and the political participation of diverse sectors and ideologies. After the peace agreement, 98% of the guerrilla fighters were demobilized and with the aim to open the democratic system, there was the creation of a new political party (Salazar 2019). Huge amounts of money and resources from the international community flowed into the country to achieve development in the regions and countryside and the rates of violence decreased. Therefore, both tourism and investor trust increased, and Colombia was seen as a successful example of a peace process. The longest conflict in the Western hemisphere had ended.

Nonetheless, the joy was ephemeral, and underlying unresolved problems returned under new modalities and agents. There were new power structures in both the paramilitary and guerrilla groups. The fighters who had been demobilized, due to the lack of opportunities in civil life came back to the conflict. Illegal activities such as drug trafficking and mining became once again the fuel of the conflict. The unequal access to resources and the extreme polarization that were left behind by sixty years of conflict turned Colombia again into an unsafe country.

The violence, especially towards those with a social leadership role, has increased from 2016 to 2021 (Statista Research Department 2021), seemingly with no institutional actions to overcome the crisis. The extreme political polarization and the economic crisis have generated social mobilizations that have ended with extreme repression from the state. The unequal access to resources has left Colombia as one of the most unequal

countries in the region surpassing 51.3 points in the GINI measurement of inequality⁹ (The World Bank 2019), demonstrating that inequality in the use and distribution of land had not be addressed. Similarly, extractivist economic models have led to a loss of fauna, flora and natural resources, affecting not only local communities but also the environment and those who defend it. Additionally, the new worldwide economic and political process left by globalization and the current COVID-19 pandemic has increased the inequalities within the Colombian population, adding new elements to the historical crisis that has faced the country over the last sixty years.

In this context, around half a million Colombian people have fled and resettled around the world since 1985 (ICMC, Europe 2013). The preferred destinations are countries in the same region or those where Spanish is spoken. However, European and North American countries (U.S. and Canada) are also chosen destinations, especially for those who can pay for additional legal procedures such as visas, airplane tickets, etc. In this research, all the interviewed women had travel documents (Canadian or U.S. visa) and all of them were able to incur expenses for tickets to Canada or the U.S.

In conclusion, the structural and still unresolved problems of the Colombia state – the unequal use and distribution of land, the still limited political participation, the international agenda and economy imposed by other countries that generate overexploitation of natural resources and prevent autonomy and sovereignty in public policies and finances – led to the armed conflict that forced the displacement of the Colombian population. Even though there was a peace agreement, new events such as the

⁹ “The Gini coefficient (Gini index or Gini ratio) is a statistical measure of economic inequality in a population. The coefficient measures the dispersion of income or distribution of wealth among the members of a population” (CFI 2021).

murders of social movement and political leaders, massive protests in the countryside, and environmental damage are still affecting the country and motivating people to flee. Research on this population in exile and their experiences continues to be highly relevant.

Colombian refugees in Canada: history and context

In this section I describe the context of the Colombian refugee population in Canada. I start by briefly outlining the economic and political relationship of the two countries and the humanitarian aid that Canada has offered to Colombia due to its armed conflict. I continue with the immigration patterns of Colombians during the middle of the 20th century up to the 1990s when the first refugee waves started to appear in Canada. Finally, I focus on the last two decades where the big waves of refugee claimants turned Colombia into one of the top countries from which people sought asylum in Canada. The special focus on this time period matches the time that women interviewed for this research came to Canada, as part of a larger process of the Colombian population in Canada going through the refugee claim modality.

The bilateral relationship between Canada and Colombia was established formally in 1953 (G. A. Canada 2021), when both countries founded embassies and consulates in the other's territories. In 2011, a free trade agreement was established, increasing bilateral cooperation and strengthening diplomatic relations. Since then, there has been extensive cooperation between the countries that has been consolidated over the last decade.

As part of this process, Colombia became one of the largest recipients of humanitarian aid from Canada. The average humanitarian aid became around \$40 million per year, through programs that were focused on achieving gender equality, accessing quality education, responding to the needs of Venezuelan migrants who took refuge in Colombia,

and building sustainable and inclusive economic growth and employment (G. A. Canada 2021).

The peace agreement and its subsequent implementation also became an important scenario for funding; according to the Canadian government, after the agreement's approval in 2016, Colombia "has been provided \$34.5 million CAD to support peacebuilding efforts" (G. A. Canada 2021). This money is usually channeled through nonprofit organizations and Canadian missions that work in the Colombian countryside and also monitor the human rights situation in the territories. The role that Canada has had during the implementation of the peace agreement has made a relevant impact on Colombian vulnerable populations (G. A. Canada 2021).

Similarly, Canada also has played an important role hosting Colombian immigrants and receiving a flow of refugees. Through the Government Assisted Refugee Program (GAR) and the high rate of refugee claims acceptance for Colombian people, Canada has resettled Colombian refugees since the decade of the 1990s when the first refugee wave started and later increased its numbers through the decades of 2000 and 2010. A brief context of economic immigration flows is described below that later changed mostly to refugee and refugee claimants, corresponding with the time patterns among the interviewed women.

The history of Colombian immigration to Canada can be explored alongside other Latin American migration waves during the 20th century. It began in the 1950s and continued with a constant flow until the end of the century (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008). The first wave consisted of economic immigrants with access to education and economic resources that allowed them to travel and resettle in a new society. According to Mata (1985), during the 1970s, there was an important influx of Ecuadorians and Colombians in what

was called the 'Andean wave.'¹⁰ "The immigration from Ecuador and Colombia accounted for 30% of the total 20 country inflow during 1973 and 1975" (Mata 1985: 37).

After the Andean Wave, the second peak of Colombian immigration was near the end of the 1990s. This new flow was mostly refugees who through the Government Assisted Refugee Program (GAR) were resettled in the country, after Canada declared Colombia as Source Country Class in 1997.¹¹ Under this program, people who have had the following experiences would have the right to resettle in Canadian territory without legal steps such as a hearing:

Seriously and personally affected by civil or armed conflict; have been detained or imprisoned; Subject to some other recurring form of punishment as a direct result of acts which, if committed in Canada, would be considered legitimate expressions of free thought or legitimate exercise of civil right pertaining to dissent or trade union activity; or to meet Convention refugee definition with the exception that they are living in their country of nationality or habitual residence; and there must not be reasonable prospect, within a reasonable period of time, of a durable solution (Canadian Council For Refugees 2011).

¹⁰ This immigration flow corresponded to an amnesty that allowed for regularizing the legal status of any person who had come before November 1972. Although all Latin American nationality groups were favoured by this legislation, Ecuadorians and Colombians were admitted in higher proportions than the others (Mata 1985).

¹¹ This denomination means Colombians were part of one of the three source programs through which Canada can select refugees overseas and resettle them in its territory (Canadian Council For Refugees 2011).

Between 1999 and 2005, 57% of Colombian refugees in Canada arrived through this program, while the remaining 43% belonged to those who made their claims at the border or at an airport and had to face the adjudication refugee system. This turned Colombia into the primary source of refugees in Canada at that time (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008). In 2002 the implementation of the IRPA put a high emphasis on the securitization of the border and consequently Canada implemented a high grade of distrust and the need for extra documentation for those who were claiming refugee status. This established the refugee system as a filter to avoid undesirable migration (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008).

Similarly, by 2002 the proportion of economic immigrants among Colombian migrants to Canada was 37% lower than refugees. This percentage was shown through the visas issued at the Canadian embassy in Bogotá which shifted to 56% for protected persons versus 29% for economic class (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008). These numbers also corresponded with the peaks of violence in the country. Between 2001 and 2003, the violence against the civil population reached one of its highest points. After the Caguan negotiation failure, the territorial expansion of the FARC-EP and paramilitary groups, the imposition of the Plan Colombia to fight against drug trafficking, and the new model of democratic security by the president of that period Álvaro Uribe Vélez, there was an increase in refugee petitions at the Canadian embassy in Bogotá.

This situation changed by the end of 2003 when the number of people applying to the refugee program decreased alarmingly. The reason was the end of the agreement that Canada had with human rights organizations and different governmental institutions in Colombia that referred cases of persecution directly to the Canadian government. This ended because of the corruption and trafficking of refugee visas in the Colombian congress (Canadá, la ruta de las víctimas del conflicto 2013).

Consequently, the number of asylum seekers at the border and inland increased, and by the end of 2004, Colombia turned into “the primary source of refugees with 3,664 applicants and the majority were filed at the United States border” (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008). By the end of the same year, the Safe Third Country agreement between Canada and the U.S. was implemented. With this new measure the number of refugee claimants decreased drastically from January to June 2005 with 70% fewer claims in comparison with 2004 (Riaño Alcalá et al. 2008).

In 2007, Colombia was still one of the top five countries from which people sought refuge protection, with only Mexico and Haiti ahead of it (Immigration 2021). This situation continued for the five-year period 2010-2015, when the rate of claimant acceptance was in the top 10, only exceeded by China, Pakistan, Mexico and Haiti (News · 2015). The predominance of refugees coming through the Government Assisted Program (GAR) decreased by 2014; even though Colombia was still in the top 10 list, the number was low compared to other countries such as Iraq and Iran (News · 2015). Despite the safe third country agreement restrictions, the asylum seeker option has been the most used to reach Canada and be granted refugee status.

In 2017, there was a 61% increase in the number of asylum seekers from Colombia in comparison with 2016, however in 2018 and 2019 there was an increase of 214% and 289% respectively in comparison with that same year (I.R. B. of Canada 2021). These peaks can be seen as a result of an extreme polarization in the country after the peace agreement: the rise of a new government with a military strategy to combat the conflict, the witch-hunt of opponents to the government, the failed attempts of land restitution and victim reparations, among others. Similarly, in 2020 and 2021 the number of claims due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic fell, however, the number of acceptance rates were still high.

In this context, Colombia is still one of the major source countries of refugees for Canada, especially through the asylum seeker route which uses the refugee and asylum adjudication system to determine if the claim is true and the person can be considered a protected person, so they can then make a request for permanent resident status (T. B. of C. Government of Canada 2018). Overall, in 2021 there were 45,000 Colombian protected persons and 17,900 had been granted permanent residency, a process that similarly with other bureaucratic steps have been delayed with the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Press · 2021).

To conclude, the bilateral relationship between Colombia and Canada has its roots in the political and economic agreements that have been signed through the years. The humanitarian aid made Canada an important regional partner to Colombia. However, the relationship that matters for the aim of this thesis corresponds to the role of host country that Canada has had during the last thirty years for Colombian refugees and refugee claimants, a period of time that matches the peaks of violence during the armed conflict.

Knowing the context of the two countries included in this research is very important to understand the current situations that Colombian refugees face. Refugee claimants are fleeing from a country with the oldest armed conflict in the Western hemisphere where the war was toward the civil population, and they believe they are arriving to a host society where there is a tradition of accepting displaced people regardless of their ethnicity, cultural background, and socio-economic status. However, history shows the opposite and clarifies how immigration criteria was and is still established by political agendas about which people are worthy of protecting and resettling depending on bias associated with them. Likewise, the history between Canada and Colombia shows a close relationship in humanitarian matters, especially in providing money for development objectives, promoting the peace process, and more recently resettling refugees, who in

most cases relocate to Canadian large and medium cities and are highly influenced by solidarity networks that have been built over time.

Chapter 3: Colombian women's experience of the refugee and asylum adjudication process

How refugees and asylum seekers experience the process

In this chapter, I will describe the lived experiences of the Colombian women I worked with who applied for refugee status or asylum in Canada. To facilitate understanding of the process, I will divide the experience in different sections, however, it is imperative to clarify that every step is part of an ongoing process that only ended with the decision of the hearing. Similarly, the reader should be aware that this is a descriptive chapter of the process, and no analysis is included. It only presents how women experienced the process and it is based only on what they narrated. Every step in the process was described by them. In this way, I start by describing my research participants' entry into the country which, depending on how they entered (crossing the land border or landing at an airport), involves different actors and procedures. Second, I will focus on the lawyer interactions and the legal documentation that claimants had to file and submit for the hearing. Third, I will discuss the integration process which starts as soon the claimants obtain the refugee claimant ID and keeps going even after they have been approved in the hearing. Fourth, I present the hearing itself as the central event in the refugee and asylum adjudication process, and finally the different outcomes that can result from the hearing. Particular attention will be paid to women's feelings of powerlessness, vulnerability, and uncertainty, which are present during the whole process. These emotions allow me to explore power dynamics at play with the various state and non-state agents that women have to face.

How to make a refugee claim in Canada

There are two ways to make a refugee claim that largely depend on the entry point. One possibility is at a Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) office located at any of the official Canadian border crossings; the other is at an Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) office once the person arrives in Canada, usually by plane. Depending on the mode of entry, there are different timelines, procedures and authorities involved that change and become aligned once the claim is made and people wait for the hearing summons. I will start by describing the steps that must be followed by people who enter by land and focus on how the women I interviewed experienced this mode of entry into Canada. I pay particular attention to the economic and emotional challenges the women faced. Afterwards, I will describe the process inland, showing that despite differences in the authorities involved and necessary steps, the experiences are similar.

According to the current Immigration Act, people who request refugee status at the border must not be in violation of the Safe Third Country Agreement.¹² The only exceptions are: (i) someone who already has a family member with legal status living in Canada, (ii) someone who is under eighteen years of age without a legal guardian, (iii) someone who has been granted any Canadian document such as a work/study permit, and (iv) someone who can apply for a “public interest exception.”¹³

¹² This agreement denies the right to claim refugee status to anyone who has used the U.S. pathway to arrive at the Canadian border as it is assumed they could have claimed refugee status there first.

¹³ According to the immigration page this can include people "who have been charged with or convicted of an offence that could subject them to the death penalty in the U.S. or in a third country. However, a refugee claimant is ineligible if he or she has been found inadmissible in Canada on the grounds of security, for

Among the women I worked with, eight out of ten entered the country through the Canada-U.S. border. Two of these had family living in the country who picked them up on the Canadian side. The remaining six, who did not meet the requirements listed above, all had U.S. tourist visas. Two of them, crossing at the Montreal border, were initially arrested but treated nicely by the CBSA officers.¹⁴ The other four, crossing at an Ontario border, entered the country without being stopped. Patricia, a middle-aged woman who has been in Canada for ten years recounted: “We drove from the U.S. to Canada and did not find anyone at the border.... We did not have any contact with any border agents. We crossed the border, sorry the door was open, and we entered!”¹⁵

Although none of the women described their encounters with immigration officers at entry points as unpleasant, the experiences leading up to these encounters were stressful. First, women described their urgent need to flee their home country, at times having to leave without their documents or money. They spoke about lacking information about the process and not knowing who to turn to for help. A number of them emphasized the onerous expenses they had to incur while in transit, including costly taxi rides and car rentals. One woman named María, a middle-aged woman who has been in Canada for six

violating human or international rights, or for serious criminality, or if the Minister finds the person to be a danger to the public” (Immigration 2003).

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that in my study arrests only happened at this border. When people get arrested by the CBSA at the border it is usually because they are doing what is considered an irregular arrival under the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness (C. B. S. A. Government of Canada 2014) and must be stopped by the government. This became particularly important in the aftermath of 9/11 when there was increased concern over national security (Wilson and Donnan 2012).

¹⁵ Some of these women might have entered before 2002, when the new IRPA was instituted, and border security was heightened.

years, described how she did not have the money to rent a car and her sister could not cross to get her as she did not yet have her citizenship card. She recounted:

I saw the river (St. Clair River, between Sarnia ON and Detroit), and I thought maybe we could swim across. The taxi drivers were not very helpful because we had no Canadian visas. It was not until my brother-in-law called a man and explained the situation that someone helped us to cross the border. He charged us 200 dollars, though.

Another woman named Rosa described how their family of 13 could not afford a second set of plane tickets from Orlando, Florida, so they had to rent two cars for the rest of the trip to the Canadian border. While these experiences are not part of the process I focus on in this chapter, they are relevant to mention here because they illustrate the vulnerability and uncertainty faced by asylum seekers even before they arrive at the border or at the airport.

In the case of people entering by land, the next step after proving they have fulfilled the third country agreement is to have an interview with a CBSA agent stationed at the border. During this interview, everyone in the family (except people under 18 years old) must explain why they are seeking refugee protection. If the person does not speak English or French, translators are available to help them. Before the interview, each person has to fill out a series of forms¹⁶ where they are asked to elaborate on what they

¹⁶ Notice of seizure (BSF 698 or IMM5265), Schedule 12 – additional Information- Refugee claimants in Canada, Schedule A – Background declaration, Generic application form for Canada, Seized Documents, Refugee protection claimant document, Interpreters declaration, Office Notes, Departure Order, Acknowledgement of conditions, among others.

have done over the last five years (e.g., political and social affiliations, countries visited, occupation, past employment, level of education, and languages spoken). The agent also asks how much money they have and on some occasions the luggage can be inspected.¹⁷ Once the forms are completed and signed, the CBSA officer evaluates if the applicant represents a national danger and decides if their case is worthy of being referred to the Refugee Protection Division (RDP). If the latter is the case, the CBSA officer retains all identification documents in possession of the applicant, such as passports and visas and driver's licenses.¹⁸ After that, the same CBSA agent takes biometric measurements and starts the procedure to grant a new Canadian ID and legal status to the applicant. By the time the interview ends, the applicant is given the new ID document in the form of a brown paper sheet with a specific number. This number will remain as their personal identification, even after they have obtained permanent residency or citizenship. The applicant is then informed that they will be summoned for an oral hearing to defend their claim (some are given the date at this point, others have to wait). The applicant also receives a folder with a copy of the documents just filled out and information (address, telephone numbers) on shelters and places that help refugees and newcomers in their planned destination.

This interview process can take anywhere from four hours to two weeks and, even though officers are polite, the waiting period, as well as the treatment received while waiting, can

¹⁷ The women who entered through Montreal stated their phones and laptops were inspected as well.

¹⁸ At the end of the process, if the Refugee Protection Division approves the person, they can apply for permanent resident status, and at the end of this process, their documents will be sent back to them. This is when they become legal permanent residents.

be a cause of anxiety and physical discomfort. After days, even weeks of travelling, the refugee claimants are forced to wait for undetermined periods of time in offices that are ill-equipped for long waits. One of my interviewees, Rosa, an elderly woman who has been in Canada for four years, told me about how they had to sleep on the floor as they waited to be interviewed by the CBSA agents. “We were very tired after the trip, so we laid down on the floor and tried to sleep as each member of the family was called in [for a long interview] by the agents.” The feeling of powerlessness and uncertainty is heightened by the fact that many of the claimants do not know the language or understand the procedures and often feel lost and neglected. Teresa, a middle-aged woman who has been in Canada for twenty-one years, recounted:

I do not know why nobody was attending to me. There were a lot of tourists and also other people claiming protection. There was a man who came from Pakistan or Afghanistan, I do not remember, but he spoke Spanish and went to the front desk and asked them [in English] why they were not assisting me. They told him they were swamped, even though we saw them laughing, getting lunch, and talking to each other. I was the last person to be called in.

Regardless of the officers’ intentions here, it is clear that refugee claimants’ experience upon entering Canada can be both unsettling and disorienting, magnifying pre-existing feelings of vulnerability.

The border represents the first encounter refugee claimants have with the Canadian government. From that time onwards, the feelings of powerlessness, uncertainty, and vulnerability described above will follow them through the process. Prolonged periods of waiting and lack of information appear to be a constant. The realities of being stateless

and their liminal status are underscored by the confiscation of their original identity documents and the granting of temporary ones by the Canadian government. Refugee claimants feel that they are less than citizens: they have lost their country of origin, a big part of their previous identity, and the control they once felt they had over their lives.

Now that I have described the steps and experiences of those who enter Canada by land, I want to turn to the situation of those who come in through an airport and claim refuge inland. The claimants usually come in with a tourist visa that allows them to stay in the country for a determined period of time.¹⁹ Before this period expires, they must go to an Immigration and Refugee Board office (IRB) and make the claim. The standard steps described above (depriving them of original documents, interviewing them, and issuing temporary documentation) remain the same. The only difference is that while they wait to receive their temporary ID, which may take anywhere from a few weeks to several months, they are responsible for securing their own shelter, food and other necessities. They are still considered tourists and, hence, are not entitled to any economic or legal aid granted by the Canadian government.

Refugee claimants who enter by plane experience feelings which are similar to those already described for claimants at the border, but the levels of anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty can be higher. The extended waiting time and the lack of economic support and legal documents do not only delay the process, but also complicate access to basic

¹⁹ There are two documents that allow entry to Canada for Citizens or Permanent Residents of different countries. The Visa-exempt (eTA eligible) and the Visa. In the first case, the eTA is needed for those travelling by plane coming from Western and rich countries. On the other hand, a visa is a document issued by the Canadian embassy that allows somebody to enter the territory based on legal and economic criteria. Countries with a visa requirement are part of what is called the developing world.

services such as housing, health services, and education. The story of Valentina, a middle-aged woman who has been in Canada for twenty-two years, illustrates the challenges faced in this situation:

We were living with another family [for free] in a small room of an apartment. It was really hard because we were not used to it. We did not want to bother anyone; therefore, we always stayed in the room and only went out when the other family left the place. We stayed there until we could afford our own apartment and our life changed.

Valentina's description emphasizes the challenges faced by those who, entering as tourists, have no government aid and few additional resources to secure suitable shelter. This situation, as described by Valentina, is not only uncomfortable (e.g., living in crowded conditions with little privacy) but also considered humiliating as they must often depend on the charity of others.

Once they are deemed eligible by the officers associated with the corresponding government agency (CBSA for the Border and IRB for Inland), all refugee claimants are referred to the Refugee Protection Division (RDP) which will host an oral hearing to decide whether the narrative they presented meets the requirements of national and international refugee law. The hearing date is set by the RDP, and in some cases, it is given to the claimants once they receive their new Canadian ID.

Once the refugee claimant documentation is obtained, applicants must search for more permanent housing while waiting for the oral hearing and find a lawyer or legal representative to complete the rest of the required documentation, which will be sent to

the IRB. In the meantime, the adaptation process also commences as, while waiting for the hearing, they must study one of Canada's official languages, find a job, and build their own community support network.

In summary, regardless of their form of entry to Canada, the women recounted that they felt uncertainty, anguish, and discomfort. Despite the fact that they did not mention having any negative interaction with any of the state agents at the border or inland, the situation itself is stressful. Fleeing without documents, long trips to reach Canadian territory, high expenses in tickets and car rides, bad conditions to sleep and rest, and unknown waiting time are part of what the women endure in their experiences to make the claim.

The lawyer procedures

Following the experiences of the women during the refugee and asylum adjudication process, I now turn to their encounters with lawyers. The lawyer not only helps with filling out the Basis of Claim Form (BOC),²⁰ but acts as an intermediary between the IRB, RDP, and RAD and the refugee claimants. Similarly, the lawyer provides legal advice regarding the "proper" way to act in the oral hearing, preparing claimants for how to behave in front of the adjudicator. They also help to translate and write the narrative, which will be read by the adjudicator and influences his or her decision. Their aid,

²⁰ This is the most essential document in the process during the refugee and asylum adjudication process. It gathers personal information of the claimant, the reasons for the claim, the steps of protection that the person took before coming to Canada, the people who are part of the process and the narrative of the facts which will be asked and confirmed during the hearing.

however, is limited to ensuring the clarity of the narrative in English or French. They do not give advice about the narrative which is intended to support the applicants' claim. The lawyer primarily serves as legal accompaniment during the hearing and ensures due process. At the end of the hearing, they must present the final defense statement where they openly advocate for the claimant. This last defense can be oral or written, and during COVID times, more time was allowed to submit written submissions.

Accessing a lawyer is a benefit granted by provincial governments through entities of legal aid that support people who cannot afford legal advice and representation. Nevertheless, this benefit varies depending on provincial policies, which in turn change depending on the provincial government in power. Claimants are given fifteen days to secure a lawyer which is a relatively short time to find good counsel. The refugee claimants I interviewed had varied experiences with lawyers.²¹ However, all of them agreed on the hands-off attitude of their lawyers, who never gave them specific advice for their narratives or how to succeed in the oral hearing.

According to women's accounts of their experiences, they usually meet their lawyers four times: (i) when they request assistance, (ii) when they work on the narrative to be submitted, (iii) when they receive the notification about the hearing and their lawyer collects the evidence and explains the procedures and common questions that might be asked, and (iv) when the lawyer prepares them for the hearing by giving them advice on

²¹ Most of the interviewed women stated having a male lawyer, only one expressed having a female who according to the interviewed, was not the principal and was working on behalf of the main lawyer who was also a man. For that reason, during this section I will use the pronoun "he" to refer to them.

how to behave in front of the adjudicator. Below, I describe what transpires at these meetings.

In general, for the first time, most seem to choose lawyers based on their knowledge of Spanish or recommendations by Colombian acquaintances. Jenny, a middle-aged woman who has been in Canada for 11 years, told me:

In a shelter, someone gave us a lawyers' list, but another Colombian family recommended to us a specific lawyer because he was really good. When we asked him for representation, he told us that he was taking every Colombian case because he knew more about the Colombian situation than any of us.

Nevertheless, the disappointment about the hands-off attitude of the lawyers, who they expected to take a more active role in advocating for their case, was clear from the first encounter. Rosa explained:

The lawyer does not add or take away anything. If you choose the wrong word, they will not do anything to fix it. This is different from what I expected from a lawyer.... They remain silent and you have to defend yourself. They do not help you.

From these and other accounts I collected it is evident that my participants feel there is a lack of support for preparation of the narrative and the hearing. Only one of the ten women I interviewed expressed gratitude for the help she received from the lawyer, and this involved a situation during the hearing (not in the previous encounters) where the lawyer spoke at length advocating for the claimant. Girasol recounted:

The lawyer for the hearing was not the man we were told would be with us; they sent a different person that did a fantastic job! He spoke for around twenty minutes and defended our claim very well.... When the adjudicator told us about the relocation possibility, he argued against that, and he always prioritized keeping our family together.

Most other women, however, expressed disappointment and even blamed the lawyer for any negative outcomes. Luciana, a young single mother who has been in Canada for three years, complained that her lawyer did not even do his translation job properly. She stated:

In my case, the way they translated the narrative was wrong, and the lawyer even arrived late to the hearing. The adjudicator allowed her to ask me a couple of questions, but all of them were to support the adjudicator's point. I lost my hearing in part because of that lawyer's actions.

During the second appointment, the lawyer fills out the BOC and compiles the rest of the documents that must be sent to the IRB. An important part of this meeting involves preparing the case narrative, which has to be written in the applicant's mother tongue and then translated into English or French. This document will be the cornerstone of the hearing. Anthropologists of the state have studied the importance of written documents as one of the central bureaucratic practices shaping state-citizen relations that usually works to the disadvantage of the subjects for whom the documents are being written (Gupta 2012). It is interesting to note that the written narrative replaces the complex lived experiences that through it are summarized and simplified rendering them legible to state agents. This narrative is standardized so that every actor involved in the adjudication

process can assess its value on objective grounds and appeals can be made, when needed. The fact that the narrative has to be translated into a language that is not the claimant's places her in a position of dependency and vulnerability vis-à-vis the translator who is usually the lawyer. When the written narrative is ready, the lawyer may look for a second opinion and send the narrative to a translator. This person may also have a meeting with the claimants and confirm with them the accuracy of the translation. This meeting with a translator, however, is not common and varies depending on the lawyer. Luciana, for instance, emphasized the inaccuracy of their narrative:

When I went to the lawyer's office, she received my documents and wrote my narrative. I do not know what happened, though, because, in the end, when I had my hearing, the narrative had a bunch of mistakes and inaccurate information.

The poor translations and imprecise information in the written narrative may affect the hearing and the subsequent adjudicator decision. As it has been explained above, if the adjudicator cannot make sense of the narrative, the claim can be denied regardless of the risk claimants face.

The third and fourth meetings with the lawyer depend on the hearing summons. It is only after claimants are summoned that the third and fourth appointments can be carried through. It means that the length of waiting for the hearing can be equivalent to the time passed between the second and third/fourth meetings which can be anywhere from months to years. Depending on the time passed since the last meeting, claimants and lawyer have to go over the narrative again. The appointments are scheduled for two weeks or two days before the hearing and the core of these encounters are requesting the evidence that supports the claim, explaining briefly what the hearing is like, going over

the possible questions the adjudicator may ask, and outlining the proper way to behave in front of the adjudicator.

The requested evidence can vary from identifications, legal documents (diplomas, notarial certifications, title deeds, and so on) to photos, airplane and bus tickets, news and reports. Everything that demonstrates the truthfulness of the narrative is valid, however claimants must be very selective in the chosen proofs due to the need for every document to be translated, which is costly. Generally, these fees are paid by the same legal aid agency that funds the lawyer and there is a limit in the number of words to be translated. The translation, likewise, is done by an official translator who usually works together with the lawyer and checks thoroughly the narrative as required. Once the claimants select the proofs, the lawyer takes them to the translator, makes a copy, and subsequently sends them to the RDP.

The lawyer's explanation about the hearing is divided in two parts. First, the lawyer covers the common questions the adjudicator may ask related to the perpetrators, the determinant facts that made the claimants flee, the rationale behind the claimants' decisions, and the necessity of resettlement in Canada instead of in another city in their home country. The lawyer goes over these likely questions based on his previous experience with other claimants who have been asked similar questions. Second, they discuss the proper behaviour that claimants must display in front of the adjudicator: from when they should stand up and sit down, to where they should look during the hearing, and when it is a good moment to talk or not.

Regarding the first part, related to the questions, during the interviews the women expressed again the hands-off attitude of the lawyer, who limited comments to briefly

explain the hearing procedures and the common questions the adjudicators might ask, rather than delve into their narrative and prepare appropriate answers for each claimant's case. Lucía, for instance, described how:

a couple of days before the hearing, the lawyer set up a meeting when he prepared us with some common questions, nevertheless, he never reflected on our narrative and the specific questions the adjudicator would ask. I think he should have prepared us better.

Patricia also mentioned that she and her husband were prepared for the hearing thanks to their own research, otherwise, if they had only taken what the lawyer explained, they would have failed at their hearing: “the lawyer did not say or explain anything relevant. As a claimant, we have to do our own fieldwork and ask other claimants how the hearing was to understand better how we should be prepared.”

The lawyer's passive attitude regarding the preparation of the narrative and the hearing questions made the interviewed women feel alone during the process. It was common for them to talk about this loneliness during our interviews.

The lawyer's hands-off approach in preparing the narrative and questions is contrasted with the lawyer's instructions on how the claimant should behave themselves during the hearing. The lawyer may even spend an entire meeting providing recommendations on the proper way to act and answer questions. He stresses the importance of remaining silent; speaking only when asked by the adjudicator and responding exactly to what the adjudicator is asking. The essential message to the claimants is to understand that the power in the room belongs to the adjudicator who will be in charge of guiding the

discussion. After these two meetings, the encounters with the lawyer before the hearing are completed, and claimants are left waiting for the hearing day, where, as stated above, the lawyer will also be present.

In summary, as described, there are four times when claimants have contact with the lawyer before the hearing. During the interviews, the research participants all commented on their lawyers' distant attitude during the whole process. They recounted emotions of loneliness and powerlessness during their encounters with them. In some cases, the lawyer may even be the reason for negative outcomes of the hearing, whether because there is not an accurate translation of the narrative or there is not guidance on how they should answer the questions during the hearing.

Integration process

As stated above, this is not a separate stage during the refugee and asylum adjudication process. On the contrary, the integration process starts as soon as claimants receive their refugee claimant ID at the border or at any IRB office inland and goes on even after the hearing has been concluded and their claims have been accepted. Looking for a house, applying for Ontario Works (welfare), learning English or French, finding a job, and creating new solidarity and communal networks are essential steps that every newcomer, regardless of their immigration process, has to take. For refugee claimants, however, these experiences are burdened with extra negative elements. First among these is the forced displacement experience that places them in the position of newcomers in a different country with a foreign language and customs. Second, their still unresolved legal situation before the hearing does not allow them to be fully resettled in the new country until some state representative accepts their claim, a situation that turns them into

a liminal persona.²² Finally, they experience structural integration barriers in the host society, including prejudice against them.

In this section, I describe the interviewed women's experiences during their integration process. This section is divided into: (i) describing the process of applying for welfare and trying to cover their basic needs, (ii) learning the language and creating social networks, and (iii) the structural barriers they have faced even after their claim was accepted and they were allowed to resettle in Canada. Time and waiting are transversal elements during this stage, and every woman agreed on their importance during the interviews.

Once the claimants have finished all the required procedures and steps at the border or with the IRB and have been granted a refugee claimant ID, they are "free to go" and apply for welfare which will provide economic support for the claimant's basic needs such as shelter, food, medications, etc. In Ontario, where the interviews were conducted, the aid is through the Ontario Works program that provides financial assistance to refugee claimants and other residents of the province who are out of work.²³

During the interviews, all the women explained that even though the economic aid is a significant relief, single mothers in particular cannot make ends meet. They need to work and earn extra money to fulfil their obligations, sometimes including paying debts and

²² Liminal persona refers to someone who is between two stages or statuses. The concept was developed by Arnold van Gennep (*Rites de passage*, 1909) and Victor Turner (*The ritual process*, 1969). This concept is central in the analysis for this thesis (see chapter four).

²³ Some people commented that in the province of Quebec, the equivalent program is Social Assistance and Social Solidarity.

sending money to Colombia to their families who were left behind. Girasol, a mother of two kids, narrated how she and her husband had to find a job to have all the expenses covered: “Regardless of welfare, which is tremendous support, we have had to work in whatever position is available because social assistance is not enough.”

Women expressed that while receiving social assistance they are not allowed to have any job. Therefore, they often have to work in what is considered survival jobs which usually pay less than the minimum wage and are considered under-the-table income, meaning the money is not taxable and generally is paid in cash. Overall, during the interviews, most women had worked under this condition in jobs related to cleaning and domestic labour, activities that are structurally associated with their gender roles.²⁴ Luciana, a single mother of three kids, narrated:

I am really thankful to Ontario Works. I spent two years on welfare because there is never an easy option for a refugee and newcomer single mother with three kids. Even though I was not allowed, I also had to work cleaning some warehouses; it was the only possible way of surviving.

Concurrently with the urgency to supply basic needs and provide economic support for themselves and their families, the interviewed women also experienced sadness and hopelessness during the first stage of the integration process. They bear the frustration of working in jobs they never had to do before and are often lower prestige than their

²⁴ Some other activities are also available depending on the season. During spring and summer people can go and do farming jobs, however, these kinds of jobs are paid under the same conditions and often the required duties are under extreme weather conditions.

academic and professional background. Lucía, who used to work as a bank manager in Colombia, stated:

No one could ever be prepared to have this change of life. I used to be an independent woman in Colombia; I used to have my own house and car, and I did not even need the aid of someone else. Here, it is the opposite, and I miss the woman I used to be.

Doubtlessly, these emotions, combined with the uncertainty, powerlessness and waiting time that are integral parts of the refugee status determination process, intensify their feelings of vulnerability, a situation that makes the process harder to bear.

The second step during the integration process is to learn a new language and create new social networks. I have placed these two steps second not because they occur right after claimants can cover their basic needs, but only because finding a shelter and securing food are more urgent than going to school, learning a new language, or making new friends. However, these two second steps are also happening simultaneously with the previous experience.

Learning a new language is also a benefit granted by the federal government. Claimants must take a proficiency test in one of the two Canadian official languages and based on that be selected to a level when he/she can learn or improve their speaking, listening, writing and reading skills. In Ontario, where the interviewed women live, the requirement is English, and the program is called English as a Second Language (ESL) and it is offered by public schools.

During the interviews, learning and being proficient in English was the barrier that all the women agreed on. All of them experienced, and some still do, feelings of frustration and insecurity concerning their language learning process. Girasol, who has been in Canada for three years and was the mostly recently arrived among the interviewed woman, described the experience as incapacitating. She commented that learning English has been the most complicated: “At the beginning and even now sometimes, I still think I cannot do it. Everything is in English, and I don’t understand anything. It is really frustrating.”

In this area, the women studying when the COVID-19 pandemic started expressed the most intense feelings of frustration. Many of them did not know how to use a computer or how to have online classes. For instance, an older woman, Rosa, stated:

English is already complicated, and now I have to learn it online. I do not know anything about technology; I am an old woman and never learned. I feel I am learning two languages now, English and technology.

These feelings are also related to the refugee determination process in which they are involved. Women felt voiceless during the process due to their lack of English proficiency. The fact that something very relevant to their lives is in the hands of people they cannot understand is one of the features of their feelings of powerlessness. Piedad, a highly educated woman, commented:

When we got to this country, I lost my voice, I did not understand anything, and I had to rely on interpreters; the forms and documentations we had to fill out were a problem for me because I did not know what I was signing.

Doubtlessly, language proficiency has become central in women's experiences of integration; all of them agreed on learning English as the sine qua non condition to find a good job, understand bureaucratic procedures, expand their friendships, and have a successful integration process.

Creating social networks is also happening alongside the other processes during refugee adjudication and integration. The first and closest network that claimants find in their journey is their families. Whether they had family in Canada who welcomed them or were travelling with their relatives, claimants find their first support circle among their kin. All interviewed women identified their family as their first and main support during the whole process. Even Luciana, a single mother, said: "My three kids have been my support during all this time."

The second network claimants have is the group of friends or acquaintances they meet in different social spaces such as the ESL program, the church, volunteer positions, and jobs. Often, these new people are also Spanish speakers and have faced or are still facing the refugee adjudication process.²⁵ During the interviews, however, women expressed contradictory feelings towards these new acquaintances. On the one hand, the new people can become friends and supporters during the process. Those who have already faced the process can provide advice from their experiences; similarly, those who do not have a hearing yet, also work as a network where they can relate feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. On the other hand, those who have already passed the hearing also create an

²⁵ El Salvador, Honduras, Venezuela and Mexico were the Latin American countries that women most often identified as the home countries of these people.

environment of stories surrounding the hearing that may increase women's stress. Most of the women manifested they did not like to talk to people who already had the hearing because there were plenty of stories that only increased their anxiety. Examples of failed hearings, deportations, and advice on how to behave to appear more reliable in front of the adjudicator are common topics to avoid in conversations with their acquaintances, since it can create a hostile and alarming environment for the upcoming hearing that leads to intense feelings of anxiety, sickness, and weakness. Teresa, who has been in Canada for twenty-one years, stated:

I remember while I was waiting for my hearing, everyone... [Spanish speakers at the ESL program.] said that the adjudicators increased the standard for being approved and no one was going to be accepted anymore. People liked to scare others. However, at that time it was less than what it is now; I have heard some unbelievably crazy tales. I do not know why people like to do that.

Teresa's thoughts are contrasted with the opinion of Girasol, who has only been in Canada for three years:

My husband met someone at the ESL program who always talked about other people's processes. He narrated the difficulties of the hearing and how we should act. He knew if people were approved or rejected. I always wanted to ask him if he was working for the IRB or why he had that kind of information. But I did not want to be rude. For sure, I did not like him.

These ambiguous feelings towards acquaintances continue even after the refugee adjudication process. During the interviews, an interesting particularity that resonated

with me was that only one woman stated that she had a good relationship with her Colombian compatriots. The remaining nine said they do not like to share spaces or have friendships with other Colombians. These nine women agreed that the Colombian community is divided because of envy and disagreements among them.²⁶

These contradictory feelings towards people that claimants meet in their daily life are part of their integration experiences. In some cases, these encounters can help claimants to succeed in their refugee process or at least to share their feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and powerlessness. However, the meetings can also turn into negative experiences that add stress and tension to a process that is already difficult.

The last network that claimants find in their integration process corresponds to the multiple institutions that help asylum seekers and refugees in conjunction with the government at both federal and provincial levels. NGOs, churches, non-profit organizations, reception centers, etc. are some of the places where claimants can find shelter, food banks, language assessments and donations.

During the interviews, women relate these institutions as indispensable sources of support. For many of them, their church, through its mutual aid networks, has helped them at every step of both the refugee adjudication and integration process. Girasol, for instance, related how her church was determinant in her decision to resettle in London,

²⁶ From my perspective as a Colombian and researcher, I would speculate that the dislike among Colombian people may be a consequence of the 60 years of armed conflict, where there has been extreme political polarization and serious human rights violations.

ON. In her case, the networks of solidarity within the congregation have been a scenario of hope:

Once our claim was done in Montreal and we got our ID, we did not know what to do, then we called the minister of our church, and he found a place for us to stay for twenty-five days. Every decision has been highly influenced by the church that has helped us at every step. That is why we came to London.

Similarly, the non-profit organizations also help the claimants with money and other facilities such as language assessments, shelter, seasonal clothing, food, etc. In London, for instance, the London Cross Cultural Learner Centre (CCLC) supports refugee claimants with language assessments and, in many cases, a shelter. In the interviews, seven women narrated how the first place they arrived was a shelter offered by the CCLC and how the agency helped them navigate the settlement process with conversational clubs, awards, regular meetings, etc. As Patricia explained, “We stayed the first two weeks in the shelter of Nancy.²⁷ She helped us a lot. We owe her a lot for everything she did for us.”

All of these institutions accomplish essential tasks during the refugee adjudication and integration process. In many cases, they are the only available help for claimants. Undoubtedly, they are an essential source of relief for claimants’ feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty.

²⁷ Nancy is a Canadian woman who worked at the CCLC transitional housing for many years. She is widely recognized by the Spanish-speaking refugee claimants because, for many years, she worked as a guide in the process. She retired in 2020.

The third and final section to discuss claimants' integration process is to bear witness to the structural barriers from the host society. Many factors such as ethnic background, gender, class, and education level may affect claimants' process even after facing the refugee adjudication system. Among the women with whom I worked, those who have been in Canada for more than ten years stated they had faced many obstacles regarding their ethnic background or appearance. Valentina, who has been here for twenty-three years and is the oldest interviewed woman, told me:

I have noticed in comparison with people who were born here, we as immigrants are better workers; however, we always have to make an extra effort, it seems that for us, it's never enough, we have to work more to demonstrate we can do things, it is unfair.

Consistent with Valentina's opinion, Piedad, a Black woman who has been in Canada for ten years, stated she had felt open discrimination for her intersectional condition of being an Afro-Latina woman. She told me: "I found Canadian society very hypocritical, people here say they like the diversity and multiculturalism, however, I have felt discrimination in jobs and volunteer positions simply because of how I look and speak."

The feelings of never being good enough are common among these women who have been in Canada for a long time. The women who have been here for less than five years and are still in their learning and adaptation process did not mention feeling discriminated against or underestimated in their skills. However, it is essential to note that many of them still are attending the ESL program or working in positions where there is no need for high skills, such as cleaning and farming.

In summary, in this section, I have described women's experiences during their integration process which is simultaneous to the legal procedure's claimants have to in order to face the refugee and asylum adjudication process.

The hearing

The refugee and asylum determination process finds its *raison d'être* in the oral hearing, where people present and defend verbally their narrative of fleeing and why they should not return to any place in their home country. After this procedure, those who are successful will acquire the legal and recognized status of refugee or, in the Canadian case, protected person. This procedure is the conclusive step for the refugee claimant process because it decides if the claimant is finally accepted for resettlement under international law or, on the contrary, must leave the country. The nature of the hearing is an administrative process that does not have any judicial consequence; however, it is supported by an idea of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which makes the process adversarial in essence and highly stressful (Lawrance and Ruffer, 2015). The claimants must be able to support their testimony with evidence and a consistent narrative to an adjudicator who is the decision-maker and is presumed to be fair and objective.

Contrary to any other trial in which everybody is innocent until the state proves the opposite, there is an initial presumption of falsehood in the refugee hearing, and the people have to prove the contrary. The preliminary thoughts are that people's claims are bogus or that many persecution cases are not worth considering under international refugee law. In this context, people must support their case with evidence and argue why they should be regarded as people needing protection. This process has been established worldwide, and each country has different timelines and questions. However, the procedure is similar in that the objective is to select those in real danger. The person who

listens to the narrative and makes the decision is someone who, theoretically, has studied the countries from where people have fled, the ongoing conflicts and the structural causes of why people are in danger. In addition, based on people's testimony and evidence, this person will follow the law and make the best decision for the person. However, in many cases, the adjudicators do not know anything related to the situation in the claimant's country; there are biases related to race, gender, class and ethnic background; and finally, instead of protecting people's lives, the hearing becomes a filter to prevent unwanted immigration (Tomkinson 2018). Canada has been recognized as having one of the fairest refugee and asylum adjudication processes and as a model to follow worldwide (Barutciski, 2012). However, "research shows significant inconsistency in recognition rates among the same countries of origin and types of claims, suggesting that decision-maker bias, opinion, and expectations for evidence can be more consequential than the merits of a specific claim" (Smith, Rehaag, and Farrow 2021: 17). Similar appreciations were made by the women interviewed for this research. Many commented on the lack of uniformity in the decisions and a lack of knowledge about the Colombian political and economic situation. This places the process itself as an adversarial, stressful, and traumatic experience.

Next, I will describe how the interviewed women experienced the hearing, which as the central step in the refugee adjudication process becomes the cornerstone of the women's experiences. To facilitate the understanding of the narratives during this process I will divide the experience in six sections that will guide the reader through the process and help to understand women's feelings and emotions. These are: (i) the waiting time between the refugee claim and the hearing summons; (ii) the hearing summons and preparation for the hearing; (iii) the beginning of the hearing and initial encounters with adjudicators and other agents (lawyer, interpreters); (iv) the questions posed by the adjudicators; (v) the general interactions during the hearing with lawyers and interpreters;

and (vi) the final decision of the hearing. During this section I will pay special attention to women's feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability, frustration, fear and powerlessness which are essential to comprehend their experiences.

Before starting, it is essential to mention that during the data collection all women indicated that they had an oral hearing,²⁸ where they and their families explained why they fled and should be considered refugees under international law. Two of them did not succeed, while the rest achieved the condition of a protected person and started the resettlement process.

The first crucial moment during the hearing experience is the waiting time for the hearing summons. As stated in the previous sections, the waiting time between making a claim and having the hearing can be anywhere from months to years. Some claimants receive the summons the same day they present the refugee claim,²⁹ while others have to wait until they receive it via mail.

The length of time claimants must wait for the hearing summons is unknown and apparently does not follow a specific criterion. It might be thought that depending on the date the claim is submitted, people should wait a proportional period; however, during

²⁸ There are some claims considered "less complex claims," which, through a process called the "File-review process," are exempt from having an oral hearing. "It allows RPD decision-makers to accept the claim after a review of the evidence in the file, which includes confirmation of security screening, the Basis of Claim Form, identity documents and other relevant evidence and submissions" (I R. B. Of Canada 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Colombian cases were approved without a hearing.

²⁹ Receiving the summons on the same day the claim is made does not ensure that claimants will have the hearing on the specified date. It can be changed many times without notification.

the interviews, women did not have a consistent or comparable timeline for their claim process and the claims of acquaintances going through the same steps.

Similarly, during this waiting period, claimants stated they felt they did not belong anywhere. They could not go back to their home country, nor could they become fully established in the new society. This makes them feel insecure and unsettled. During the interviews, the women felt unsure about their lives during the time they were waiting for the hearing, especially those who had to wait for the summons for more than six months. Piedad, for instance experienced this time as traumatic:

Waiting for the hearing is a traumatic process; no matter how much we want to assume it easily, there is a lot of expectancy, insecurity and anxiety because your stay in Canada depends on that. The hearing gets a connotation of life or death.

The lack of awareness if they would remain in the country after the hearing made them feel uncertain about their future and options in life. In many cases, they expressed a lack of motivation to start new projects that would make their new life more pleasant, even in buying new things, which in case of deportation they would have to leave behind.

As stated above, the waiting time between the claim and the hearing is also the first period of integration that comes with new challenges that also make the women feel overwhelmed. During the interviews, all women agreed that this first moment was one of the toughest of the process. Girasol, who waited for two years for the hearing summons, compared the waiting experience with the hearing itself and stated that waiting was worse:

Waiting for the hearing time was the worst thing that happened to us. Anxiety, uncertainty, and doubt are even worse than the hearing itself. Because in the hearing, you at least can speak to someone, but while waiting, you do not know what to expect.

The passivity in waiting for the hearing also characterizes this period; the women commented on losing their agency once they started waiting. As different authors have argued (Auyero 2012; Bourdieu 2000), waiting is a tool of domination that makes people feel powerless due to the impossibility of agency during the time they are waiting. There is nothing people can do, act, or go while they are waiting for the hearing summons: they can only be patient and try to cope with each new challenge they are facing.

The second section of the experience is the hearing summons and its preparation. Once the claimants have received the hearing summons, which is a letter that includes the date, time, and place where the hearing will take place, they must start preparing their narrative, the evidence and themselves for the hearing. The process begins with the lawyer, who as stated in the lawyer section has already received a notification. He collects the evidence and explains the hearing procedures. The claimants then must prepare their narrative and the possible questions the lawyer told them the adjudicator might ask.

Among the women I worked with, everyone agreed on anxiety and fear as the two predominant feelings for this period; however, the experiences were multiple on how they faced and coped with them. They felt fear of failure because their lives rely on the hearing and a person (adjudicator) that they do not know. As Rosa illustrated: “the

anxiety of losing the hearing is similar to failing an important test; however, the difference is that this time the consequence is to put our lives back in danger.”

For some women, the fear of facing the hearing was also due to the feeling of being unprepared and, therefore, unable to confront it. They stated that the lawyer’s hands-off attitude made them feel that the information they received from him was inappropriate. Therefore, their narrative did not include the key elements to demonstrate their life was in danger. Luciana, who fled due to gender violence and failed the hearing, stated:

The lawyer was not prepared, and neither was I. During the two meetings before the hearing, I only cried while the lawyer explained to me questions for which I did not have an answer. I did not have a criminal group following me; I did not escape for political reasons. From that moment, I knew my claim was going to be rejected.

These emotions of defeat even before the hearing were characteristic of the two women who failed in their hearing, highlighting how the lawyer’s role during the preparation time affects the claimants.

Other women saw the length of time between the summons and the hearing as an opportunity to prepare themselves and have a more active role during the process. The women stated that even though they felt anxiety and fear, they were sure that after the hearing, they would have an answer and the waiting would finally be done. Patricia stated: “After we got the hearing notification, we used that time to do fieldwork; we knew the lawyer was not going to help us; therefore, we asked everyone and doing that we could control our anxiety.” Other women expressed that they created visual tools that

helped them to remember how the narrative was presented and the key points. It enabled them to overcome the time and feel they were doing something rather than waiting. Girasol, for instance, expressed: “with my two daughters, we created and placed a poster in the wall of our room with important events, dates, and times. We sat in front of it every night and studied it as a family.” The possibility to be prepared for the hearing gave them a sense of agency that they did not have before.

The third moment in the hearing experience is the beginning of the hearing and initial encounters with adjudicators and other agents such as lawyers and interpreters. Nine women recounted that they had an in-person hearing at the Refugee Protection Division (RDP) in Toronto,³⁰ while only one had her hearing online due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Regardless of the hearing place, every person in the claimant’s application, except people under eighteen, must be present during the hearing and willing to answer if the adjudicator asks something related to the narrative; this means incurring transportation expenses and, in some cases, overnight stays. None of the women I worked with lived in Toronto at the time of the hearing, and most of them had never even been there before. For some of them, their lawyer took them; others paid for a bus ticket and others rented a car.

³⁰ There are three main regions in Canada where the refugee hearings take place: Eastern, Central and Western. The offices are located in the three main cities of each area: Quebec City for the Eastern region, Toronto for Central, and Vancouver for Western (Canada 2018).

Once the women arrived at the RDP offices, they entered the room stated in the summons. They describe the place as a small office with seats and tables. The Canadian flag is right behind the adjudicator, and the seat of the principal applicant is placed strategically in front of the adjudicator. The adjudicator's chair and table are higher than the claimants.

After the claimants enter the room, they usually wait for the adjudicator, the lawyer,³¹ and the interpreter,³² who arrive one by one. Six women had the experience of their lawyer arriving late; in another case, the interpreter was late; and for one, it was the adjudicator. These imbalances of time might affect the adjudicator's attitude during the hearing, if he became indisposed from the beginning. For instance, María, told me:

I had the worst scenario. The lawyer got there late, and the adjudicator was very upset and mean; when he arrived, he snatched a folder with documents I had on the table. I was petrified because those documents were the original proofs, and he took them away badly.

These feelings of fear were commonly expressed during the interviews. Even though in some cases, the adjudicator's attitude was pleasant, the women experienced concern about the environment and display of power even in how the seats were located.

³¹ Even though all women stated they had a lawyer during their hearing, this presence is not a mandatory requirement for the hearing. People can have a hearing without legal representation; nevertheless, the statistics show that the possibility of failure is higher without legal representation (Smith, Rehaag, and Farrow 2021).

³² The interpreter is hired and paid by the RDP and translates between Spanish and English.

Similarly, they felt frustration towards the lawyer and interpreter who due to their delays were affecting indirectly the result of their hearing.

Once everyone is in the room, the hearing formally begins. The adjudicator guiding the discussion explains the international law under which the hearing is conducted, the procedures, and makes the claimants swear an oath about the truthfulness of their narrative.

Right there, the fourth and central moment of the hearing experience starts: the questions by the adjudicator and the development of the narrative by the claimants. The women narrated that the first questions are related to their identity, such as name, birth date, date of entry to Canada, address and so on. The claimants' anxiety and nervousness are so high that even these simple questions might be answered wrongly. Rosa, for instance, recounted:

Everyone was scared and anxious; I had never thought before I had to pass through a process like this and how nervous we were that when he asked my son-in-law his date of birth, he said an incorrect answer. I remember the adjudicator told him, it has been only thirty minutes of the hearing, and you are lying already? And my son-in-law told him, I am so sorry, but I am petrified.

The comment of the adjudicator about the claimant lying corresponds with the anxiety and fear the research participants expressed. They are aware that rather than listening to their narrative, the adjudicator's job is to discover if they are lying. Similarly, the anxiety that the process produces is also seen in the body of the claimants, who might fall sick after the extreme pressure imposed on them. María, a nurse practitioner, narrated:

During the hearing, my husband started bleeding from his nose, his skin colour turned red, and I saw him get swollen; I was terrified, and the adjudicator told me: you are a nurse, go and help your husband.

Once the routine questions have been answered, the adjudicator focuses on the written narrative and asks related questions. Some of the questions the women described are: What are the reasons you are afraid? What are the people or groups that persecuted you? What are the dangers you face if you return to your country? What about if I send you back to your country but to a different city or region? The adjudicator also wonders about the claimants' decision to come to Canada over geographically closer countries. During the interviews, all the women agreed that the adjudicator questions were rooted in suspicion. Patricia, for instance, recounted:

During the hearing, the adjudicator thinks that the claimants are liars until we prove the opposite, every question they make is sharp, it seems if they were trying to get us to contradict what it is written or what we had been saying before.

Therefore, the answer by the claimants must be straightforward and cannot be inconsistent with the written testimony that the adjudicator has. They must defend their narrative in an orderly manner that makes sense and avoids confusion. If by any chance, the claimants mention something that it is not in the written testimony, it may be considered concealment of the truth and can be a reason for failure. Piedad, for instance, recounted she answered everything the adjudicator asked adequately; however, when the adjudicator asked her husband, it was aggressive; it seemed the adjudicator was trying to discover if the man was telling the truth.

The suspicion in the hearing produced extra tension among the women I worked with. They recounted that although they narrated a traumatic experience, they felt treated as criminals. Regarding these feelings, Lawrance and Ruffer (2014) explain that the hearing itself is a controversial process where the balances of power are unequal between the participants who also experience that their lives and future are subjected to a person's decision that does not trust them.

The adjudicator may also ask things related to the current context of the claimant's country. The person has to demonstrate expertise in the situation and why they cannot be relocated to any other place in the same region. This question is often asked based on reports with information on human rights violations that the RDP has in every country in the world called the National Documentation Package (NDP).

However, it was common for the women to note that there was an ignorance about the Colombian state, practices and armed conflict by the adjudicator. Some of them mentioned that it seemed the adjudicator was unaware of the Colombian crisis. This lack of awareness of the Colombian context was determinant for the question of relocation within the same country but to a different city, which for many would determine the failure or success of their claims. Depending on their answers, the adjudicator can interpret that people are not facing risk within their home countries and underestimate their risk. During the interviews, women related that the adjudicators' ignorance of the Colombian situation made them feel undervalued and vulnerable to someone who did not know the actual status of their claims and was nonetheless deciding over their lives.

Similarly, the women expressed defenselessness over the adjudicator's power to resettle some family members in Canada and relocate others to Colombia. The interviewees describe that just thinking about it placed them in a vulnerable position when they preferred to go back rather than follow the adjudicator's order. Piedad, for instance,

explained: “when they told me that my children and I were accepted, but they have to decide over my husband, I said no. I did not come to this country to be separated from my family.”

The fifth section during the hearing experience is the interactions that claimants have with lawyers and interpreters. Similar to other experiences, these interactions are happening simultaneously during the hearing, however, to facilitate its understanding they are presented as individual section.

Since the interaction with the lawyer was presented above, in this section I only summarize some key points of their performance during the hearing. Similar to the hands-off attitude of the lawyer during previous meetings with the claimants, during the hearing the lawyer had a passive approach that only was interrupted by the adjudicator at the end when he is asked to present the final statement. During the interviews only one woman felt supported by her lawyer. The rest of them stated feelings of frustration and loneliness.

There is another fundamental interaction that the women related during the hearing. The interpreter who is external to the process has the indispensable task of translating every interaction between the adjudicator and the women, in real time, between Spanish and English. The women’s experiences with the interpreters vary from positive to negative. Among the women I worked with, six of them recounted that the interpreter’s presence was significant for the success of their hearings. They stated that the interpreter not only translated their words but also provided meaning to them giving contextual background. This strategy was very effective by interpreters whose first language was Spanish and additionally came from a Latin American country. For instance, María indicated:

The interpreter was amazing! He tried to transmit to us peace. I understood every question from the adjudicator, and I realized he [the interpreter] was saying the same thing. I also noticed he was trying to give context to what I was saying, I know he was from Central America, I noticed his accent and he also had a moment to talk to us and told us he had been a refugee too. If I would have had to choose between the lawyer and the interpreter, I would have preferred the interpreter. I think he helped us more than the lawyer.

These women stated that even though they were experiencing feelings of anxiety and fear, having this kind of person as interpreter made them feel calm during the hearing. They related how thankful they are towards them.

In contrast, there are some other women who related that the interpreter had a bad attitude, and they felt their hearing could have gone better without this interaction. They remarked there were bad translations or interpretations and negative positions towards them. Girasol expressed she and her family felt mistreated by the interpreter and sometimes he was translating inaccurate information. This fact undermined their trust in what the interpreter was saying and what the adjudicator was understanding. She argued that this generated frustration and more anxiety due to not recognizing if the information was accurate.

The final section of the hearing experience is the finale of the hearing when the adjudicator must decide if the claim is valid and claimants are allowed to resettle in Canada, or on the contrary the claim is negative, and they must leave the country. The adjudicator can either provide the decision at the end of the hearing or take more time to think about it and send the final verdict via mail.

Among the women who I worked with, eight of them received the decision the same day of the hearing, where according to them their anxiety, vulnerability and sense of powerlessness turned into happiness, relief and comfort. They narrated that they felt a weight lifted and for the first time during their stay in Canada they were able to sleep in peace. They experienced the finale of the hearing as a victory over a time of anxiety and anguish. Rosa, a senior who has her grandchildren living with her in Canada, stated: “I was crying the whole time on our way back to London, I couldn’t speak, I only thought about my grandchildren who now were free to live a better life in this country, we did this for them.”

Similarly, most of the women described excessive fatigue after the hearing. Some of them told me they slept for days trying to compensate the stress after the long process. However, they still felt some uncertainty regarding the official decision which has to be sent via mail. Teresa whose hearing was less than thirty minutes expressed: “Even before the adjudicator told me welcome to Canada, I was waiting for the official decision. You never know if it was a joke.” The rest of the women also mentioned this anxiety.

For the women who do not receive any decision the day of the hearing, the anxiety increased along with the feeling of powerlessness. One more time they had to wait until the final decision and differently to the previous waiting experiences where they were able to find a sense of agency, during this time they felt completely helpless. Piedad, a woman who waited five years for her hearing decision, stated: “They ruined our lives; it is unfair to wait five years for an answer.”

During this waiting time, there is no person or place to ask, there is no knowledge of what is next, the legal status is also blurry, and the future is even more unclear than before. Legally, people are still refugee claimants and do not have access to full

healthcare, post-secondary education and so on. People one more time anxiously await the decision that will end their limbo state and thinking about the future disturbs them.

Summarizing, the hearing is an experience that contains different stages, as outlined above. These stages also have different emotions and experiences that may vary from very pleasant to uncomfortable, however the constant emotions prevailing during the whole hearing process are uncertainty, anxiety, vulnerability, and powerlessness. These feelings can be transformed as soon as claimants receive a positive decision or can be increased if they must continue to wait for the decision.

After the hearing: different outcomes

As it was mentioned in the experience of the hearing, claimants have two possible outcomes after the hearing: (i) receiving a positive decision and starting a formal resettlement program, or (ii) having a negative outcome and needing to think about other options to stay in the country. Next, I describe the process in each of these cases and how the women experienced each one.

After having a positive decision, the claimants can formally start a resettlement process. They lose their status of refugee claimants and start to be considered protected persons under the Canadian law. From that point they will have the rights and benefits of any Canadian permanent resident, except for the option to leave the country.³³ They will be

³³ There are two documents that allow a protected person to travel outside the country, the “Refugee travel document” and the “certificate of identity” both are permits issued by the Canadian government that allow people under the convention of refugees, protected persons, stateless persons and permanent residents of Canada in special circumstances to travel to other countries. To use this permit, people must apply, and the

covered by the provincial health system and will have all the economic benefits of newcomers. In London for example, they will have more options of places for studying English as if they were domestic students, as well as the possibility to belong to a community and social programs that were not available for refugee claimants. In general, they will have access to many services that their prior legal status did not allow them.

Additionally, they can apply for permanent residency and after sufficient time, they are also allowed to apply for Canadian citizenship. Four of the women interviewed obtained their Canadian passports after an average of five years.

The benefit of having been granted the status of protected persons is having certainty about their future in the country. Women felt relief from the fear that anyone can withdraw them from Canada and identified this as the best emotion after the hearing. Although there are still the barriers discussed in the integration section, the women experienced passing the hearing as a welcome to Canada and an end to the long trip that started the day they decided to flee.

In contrast, when claimants received an unfavourable hearing decision, there are still some steps to follow to appeal the decision. The first one is to send a claim to the Refugee Appeal Decision (RAD) asking for a review of the case and the decision. This step can be done with the same lawyer who again will be tasked with collecting the proofs and documentation to support why the first adjudicator did not make an accurate decision. There is a deadline of 45 days to submit the case to the RAD after a negative decision. Once the RAD has checked the documentation, the representatives will call the

state will make the decision if it is approved and for how long. These documents cannot be used to travel to the country of their citizenship (Immigration 2021).

lawyer and will have a meeting where it will be decided if the first adjudicator made a mistake when denying the refugee claim. This step usually does not require a second hearing and the decision is based only on the documentation presented (I.R. B. of Canada 2013).

The RAD however is not possible for those who entered the country under an exception of the Safe Third Country agreement such as for people who crossed the border with a relative living in Canada – which is the most used reason – or having a Canadian document.³⁴ In this case, their request for appeal has to be directed to the Federal Court asking to review the IRB decision. They have 15 days to submit this appeal (OWJN, 2019).

Once again, there is an undetermined waiting period, which makes the women experience uncertainty imposed by the power of the state. Differently from the first hearing where they at least had a sense of agency, this time the only mechanism of action is new proofs or documents that can support why the first adjudicator made a mistake. Furthermore, they also stated how they were told that it is not usual to win an appeal. Usually, they check the first adjudicator's reasons plus the old and new case evidence, and with that, they make the decision that according to Luciana never contradicts the first verdict:

There is a 20:80 probability of having success in this new process. To be honest, people use this time to think about what they are going to do: if they should start a humanitarian process or flee to a different country or what. The possibility of being accepted in this process is very low, especially because they are not going to act against themselves.

³⁴ See above the exceptions to the Safe Third Country agreement.

This testimony is important to show that even though at first glance it seems the women do not have any kind of agency in this new process, they actually have it related to their own lives. With the first negative decision, they become aware of the imminent possibility of deportation and start making decisions about what the next step they should follow is. It is still a waiting time, but contrary to the first when they were waiting for a summons call or a decision, this time they are also planning the future and what is going to be their next move. They already assume the decision will be negative and are prepared for the worst-case scenario. In this sense, the waiting becomes an active process that uses the time as a bridge to make new decisions.

The final decision by the RAD is similar to the first process. People receive a notification letter that says if the reasons were accepted and therefore their claim as well, or on the contrary, if the case was again denied and they must leave. After this if people do not start a different immigration process, they will receive a deportation order in which they are asked to leave the country.

After they get the final decision from the court or the RAD, and still this is not accepted, people may still have a few options to stay. The first and most common is to apply for Permanent Residence under humanitarian and compassionate reasons. This application is submitted to the IRB, and the Minister of Immigration is the direct person who makes the decision (IRPA 2002). For this petition, there is a case that has to be created with the reasons people are worthy of remaining in Canada. Their reasons have to have a double purpose. On one hand, they have to show a successful integration process to the culture and the economy and labour system, which can be affected if they need to leave. On the other hand, they have to prove they are worthy of remaining because of the economic and professional value they are offering to Canada. Friends, classmates, colleagues, supervisors, and every person who has had close contact should write a letter explaining

their relationship with the applicants and how they have integrated into the society. They must provide a perfect level in one of the two official languages, good income level and good relationships with the community.

Among my interviewees, there was one person who went through this process and only in May 2021, she and her family were approved. She narrated the difficult moments she and her family went through and how their lives were truncated during the process, not only because of what they were facing, but also because they did not have legal status that provided them with benefits and rights as any other person living in Canada.

Similarly, as the humanitarian claim is one of the last pathways to remain in the country, people still need to overcome some integration barriers, and for many people it is impossible to fulfill all the requirements, needing to look for a different process, especially those who do not have a support network like family. Consequently, they decide to not pursue this application and search for another pathway to remain in the country. One of the women found love during the process and she got married to a Canadian citizen who helped her during the process and was able to provide her with the legal status of permanent resident.

This case is unique and presents the particularities of being an immigrant woman who in many cases has in marriage the possibility not only to build a home, but also the option of obtaining legal status. According to the women interviewed, they know people who were deported; entire families had to go back to Colombia or look for protection in a different place.

For other people when deportation is a reality, they have to go to the airport with their suitcases and there, they will find their travel documents that were taken by the CBSA or the IRB officers at the moment they claimed refugee protection, as well as tickets for the

plane home. In many cases they return to Colombia, in some others they flee to another country and start again the process searching for a better and safer life.

In conclusion, I have described the experience of the women I worked with who applied for refugee status in Canada. I divided the experience in different sections to facilitate understanding. I paid particular attention to the women's feelings especially those of anxiety, uncertainty and powerlessness that were present during the whole experience.

Chapter 4: How liminality, politics of waiting, hermeneutics of suspicion and arbitrariness provide insights to the refugee and asylum adjudication process

In this chapter, I will analyze the data collected using different theoretical approaches. Based on the women's experiences during the refugee and asylum adjudication process, I will start with the concepts of liminality and politics of waiting to provide an understanding of the women's feelings during the process. Second, I will use the concepts of hermeneutics of suspicion and the doctrine of arbitrariness to understand the hearing. Finally, I will examine the role that their gender has had and why women experienced differently the process.

Liminality

In anthropology, the concept of liminality refers to being in between two stages or statuses. It was introduced in 1909 by the French anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his book "Rites of Passage," in which he describes the three transitional stages in human rituals: separation, transition, and reincorporation. The transitional phase plays a fundamental role in these stages due to its transformative nature. It is the decisive period to leave behind the past and everything associated with it and start a new and positive time where the person achieves higher status and recognition than he was used to. Turner (1970) focused his analysis on the stage called the Liminal stage, referring to it as an ambiguous state where the entities are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial" (Turner 1970:95). This state is characterized by invisibility, darkness, uncertainty, and powerlessness. "They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or

even go naked; they do not have status, property insignia, secular clothing indicating the rank or role" (1970: 95).

People living in refugee camps, stateless people and asylum seekers usually live under this condition and their lives are in a constant state of limbo. According to Turner (1970), limbo means a state of ambiguity and uncertainty where there is no control over any situation. It is an indetermined state where people lose their identity and are placed in a lower social status.

Currently, the concepts of liminality and limbo have been explicitly applied to asylum seekers or refugee claimants, people who physically are in the state but still belong outside the community. They are folks who were forcibly displaced and arrive at the borders of a country to claim protection, but they have not been identified as refugees. Their formal status will be recognized once they face the refugee and asylum adjudication process, and the nation state guarantees their right to be protected. This process, however, is a long-term procedure that can take months and even years. During it, people must wait for a hearing summons or decision letter and be prepared for any of the coming stages. Their lives constantly depend on the state's decisions, and they do not have the same rights and freedoms as citizens or permanent residents. As this process is always riddled with uncertainty and ambiguity and is in between two stages, the category of liminality works as a fundamental concept to understand the meaning of being an asylum seeker and the experiences people face through it.

In Canada, specifically, this stage is noticeable in the period of claiming refugee status and the hearing where the nation state, through an adjudicator, will decide if the person deserves the status of a protected person and, therefore, the right to obtain permanent residence and someday become citizen.

As stated above, the liminal period is characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and exclusion; characteristics that can easily be identified in the process of claiming refugee status. There is ambiguity because claimants do not know the process, they do not know how to interact with the different administrative levels in their claim, and they do not even speak the same language. They are excluded because even though they are "safe," they do not have the same rights and freedom as the insider population. They must ask permission to work and study. They cannot leave the country because they do not have their travel documents or the documents from their land, and they cannot access the provincial health plan. Instead, they are covered by the federal program, which only includes emergencies, and there is a non-existent process of integration due to the lack of language, the limited possibilities of housing and the barriers to finding a job and obtaining financial stability.

There is uncertainty due to the lack of control of the situation they are living, and the lack of knowledge about how long they will have to bear it. First, claiming refugee status is a process that people do not control themselves. There are multiple actors involved in the process, such as the refugee protection division (REP), Immigration Canada (IRCC), border agents (CBSA), legal aid institutions, and lawyers, among others. All of them have power in the process, and their actions can impact the claim positively or negatively. The asylum seeker is at the mercy of the state and its institutions, relying on the system's fairness. Second, time is also a critical factor during the process. There is a lack of information on how long the process can take. Claimants do not have precise details of the time they must remain in the process. Waiting, therefore, turns into a central point in the process. They must wait for the documents that identify them as a refugee, for their work permit or study permit, remain in a shelter waiting for an available apartment, start English as second language classes, and wait for a hearing summons and an answer.

"Waiting, suspense and uncertainty are manifestations of temporal experience of liminality" (O'Reilly 2018 : 831)

During the liminal period, subjects lose their status in the community and "their behaviour is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly and accept arbitrary punishment without complaining" (Turner 1970: 95). Asylum seekers find themselves in the same position, not only regarding the state and its bureaucratic institutions but also with the host society, which, based on prejudices of ethnicity and economic assets, excludes them and looks at them suspiciously. Riaño et al (2008:124) show how Colombian asylum seekers feel accepted into society only if they act with humility:

[The good] attitude is maintained as long as the other acts "humbly." It is not a relationship of equality. On the other hand, it is marked by unequal relations of power, as Gaspar mentions, 'what we have to value in these people (Canadians), that they trust us, but it is important for us to act humbly and recognize our weaknesses. If we recognize that, people value that we're capable of knowing who we are.'

As stated, there are noticeable power relations between the state, the host society, and the refugee claimants which can be likened, in Turner's analysis, to the chiefs, the community, and the threshold people. At the same time, in the liminal state, there is a homogenization of the liminal persons: "they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition" (Turner 1970: 95). This standardization can be seen in the view of refugee claimants as uniform victims, masses who have suffered unimaginable damages in poor and violent countries. Claimants must live at the mercy of the state and its institutions, which takes from them all power or agency to improve their conditions. This victimization also relies on power relations where the state and the host community act as

suppliers of the victim not only economically but also in guaranteeing their safety, suppressing any right to protest or complain.

These daily power demonstrations demarcate the position in the society of the asylum seekers, generating in themselves an identity of powerless people who must act and behave in a specific manner, increasing the feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity, and exclusion. These power relations also indicate who is worthy of help and divide people between deserving and undeserving, generating an ideal of how refugees must be and act including how they must be dressed, speak and behave. Pozniak (2009) illustrates this with Colombian immigrants in London, ON, who constantly compare themselves to other compatriots in terms of who is making more money, who is working and who can be considered a good immigrant instead of a burden who lives off welfare. This situation may create a state of suspicion even within the liminal people, isolating them and undermining their networks, making the process and the transitional phase harder.

The opposite can also happen, and the solidarity networks between the liminal people can help them cope with the process. As Rana and Pandya (2021:35), quoting Turner, explored with the term "communitas" where "not only the individual but also the community gets involved and creates a social bond and experience," the asylum claimants can create bonds of solidarity within those who are going through the same process and are considered threshold people. They can see themselves and relate to the living situation because ethnic, linguistic, and cultural links create a communal sense. "What is interesting about liminal phenomena is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness of homogeneity and comradeship... some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties" (Turner 1970: 96). These new social attachments become fundamental for asylum seekers who see these

relationships and networks as reference points for their own process, "areas of common living" (Turner 1970: 96), where experiences and comradeship can be found (Alkhaled and Sasaki 2021).

Another essential feature of liminality is anonymity, which alongside homogeneity provides an indistinguishable feature to the threshold people until they overcome the phase. The depersonalization that characterizes the bureaucratic structure of the state shapes the asylum claim process where people with traumatic stories, long journeys and special needs are transformed into a "claimant" that must be homogenized by the process, regardless of race, age and gender and any other criteria. This depersonalization delves into structural inequalities that continue to wound people and suppress their rights. In some way, depersonalization can also be seen as a power mechanism in controlling time, as mentioned above, and becoming ontological on the people. In other words, the refugee claimant accepts that they do not have the same rights or that they have to wait for an undetermined period or that they will live the whole process with uncertainty because that is how the social system works. The social structure of the capitalist system locates them at the bottom, tuning them in a number, another claimant that must live with it. "As immigrants and refugees, we are less than everyone in this country. We are at the bottom of the social scale" (comment I overheard in a public space where Colombian refugees were meeting).

This phenomenon is studied in more detail by Franz Fanon (1952). He explores the idea of race as a constituting element between the zones of being and not being and how even for a person living in the zone of being, their skin colour and ethnic background can place them still in the non-being range (Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou 2015). For asylum claimants, who in the current worldwide context are coming from the global south, this situation becomes ontological, not only because these structural inequalities belong to

their daily life back home, but also because they accept their position in a classist, racist and ableist society.

Likewise, this liminal position also becomes accepted and incorporated by asylum seekers. They internalize the ambiguity and uncertainty as a part of their daily lives and operate according to it. O'Reilly (2018: 835) argues:

Ontological Liminality implies having no sense of security or control over the future, and no active role in society in the present. In addition, the term also refers to how asylum seekers are perceived or represented as liminal beings and thus feared, 'othered,' homogenized and stereotyped. How they, in turn, perceive themselves, becoming in a way the label they are given.

In other words, their identity, therefore, adapts to their new and prologued situation. This can be seen in expressions used during the interviews such as "here, we are nothing"; "you cannot pretend to continue with the style of life you had before"; "in the social scale we are at the bottom"; "we are less than animals here." These express how they recognize themselves as liminal personas.

Ontological Liminality can also be seen as ontological insecurity "characterized by constant excessive fear and insecurity" (Hartonen et al. 2021:13), emotions that came with them from the moment they were forced to flee and still have to face at the place they are asking for protection. Similar to identity, this ontological insecurity translates into their body and physical and mental health.

When 'carrying traces of past experiences and injustices, intertwined with a sense of alienation, vulnerability and powerlessness, the cumulative effects of waiting, uncertainty, anxiety and stress can further develop and (re)generate mental health problems and somatic symptoms. Hypertension, increased cholesterol, sweating,

reduced appetite, acute headache, undefined pains, depression, sleeping problems, and cognitive disruption are common in asylum seekers and refugees (Hartonen et al. 2021:22).

Consequently, not having medical services or access to continued health treatments increase the state of insecurity, making it permanent.

In this way, the phase of liminality faced by asylum seekers creates internal and external conditions of living that determine their positionality in the host society. Ambiguity, uncertainty, and waiting are the most common characteristics of the process that, with time, are internalized by people. In addition, refugee claimants are also seen as a homogenized and uniform mass of victims who need constant help and protection from the state, taking away from them all possibility of agency.

However, there is an aspect of liminality that is different from what Van Gennep and Turner mentioned in their studies. According to them, the liminal phase is a transition between two life stages. Once it is completed, the person (re)enters one more time into society at a higher level or positionality. Asylum claimants passing through this stage do not necessarily enter the post-liminal phase or reincorporation process. Even going through the refugee adjudication hearing does not ensure they can be reincorporated into the society with a higher status. Unlike Turner's explanation, refugee claimants do not belong to the society that places them in the liminal phase; therefore, their "reincorporation" process does not start even after their claim is accepted; they still have to pass the integration phase, which also can be seen as a new liminal phase after the hearing.

The liminal period can also be extended once they face the hearing but do not have any answer to their case. The time after the hearing and until they receive any answer

(typically a written letter) can be considered again as a limbo stage where people face increased feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness and waiting because differently from the first stage, there is no possibility of agency. Contrary to the waiting time for the hearing, when people have to prepare their narrative and proofs and prepare themselves to face the adjudicator's questions, there is no activity or task they can do after the hearing.

Depending on the decision, they must wait for the answer and be ready for the next step. There is no clarity on how long they must wait; the adjudicator becomes the authority figure in deciding the claim and the time he will provide the answer. Additionally, there is no place or person where people can communicate and ask how their process goes; similarly, to the initial phase, they are powerless before the state.

During this phase, the time also becomes a special factor, people must wait for an unknown period which places them in a perpetual liminality position when they cannot project themselves into a particular or stable future (Hartonen et al., 2021). Concurrently this is the exact position of those whose claim was rejected and must appeal the decision, find other ways to remain in the host country or finally be deported. These people, after the hearing and the conclusion, start a new liminal phase when one more time, they must wait for bureaucratic and legal answers to their appeals or immigration processes. The main goal this time is to find other ways different from the asylum and adjudication process to remain in the host country and not return to the places they must flee. Once again, they face the liminal position when they are not recognized as protected persons or refugee claimants. Their initial liminality becomes perpetual through the time they try to regulate their stay in the country with all its features of exclusion. However, it is important to notice that during this period, there are more chances to have agency and decision. After being rejected, claimants can start to think about their options and what alternatives they have.

In summary, the category of liminality is instrumental in characterizing the refugee claimants. The processes they must face are explained by the liminal phase described by Van Gennep (1909) and Turner (1969). As stated above, one of the main features of this stage is waiting, which makes people feel like subjects of superior power. Time shapes the experience of asylum claimants due to their lack of control over it. "The intervening time is a form of temporal liminality, a space of uncertainty of waiting and for many a sense of powerlessness" (O'Reilly 2018: 831). The close relationship between waiting and the exercise of power refers to the punitive aspect of time when people are kept ignorant of how long they must wait, affecting not only the process they are going through but also their mental and physical health. The studies about this topic have been called the politics of waiting are addressed in the next section.

Politics of waiting

If there is a key component in the refugee and adjudication asylum system, it is waiting. From the moment asylum seekers arrive in the country and claim protection inland or at any border, they have to experience waiting time with just a few moments in between of agency, such as the refugee hearing. Once people begin the process, the waiting mechanism acts upon them as power of domination:

Waiting is one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power; the absolute power is the power to make oneself unpredictable and deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in total uncertainty by offering no scope to their capacity to predict (Bourdieu 2000: 228)

This, combined with their liminal situation, creates a social space where claimants are powerless to control their lives and situations.

The politics of waiting takes this name due to the nature of the activity of waiting. Time and power then play a fundamental role where people are passive recipients of others' goodwill, depending on them to exercise the essential aspects of life, such as obtaining a job, receiving proper education, or obtaining safety when life is in danger. Auyero (2012) analyzes how people accept their inactive role in the processes that matter to their lives, which often are mediated by the supreme power of the state. Veiling, for instance, refers to the idea that waiting is a process imposed by different forces rather than human will. Therefore, the delays are created by systems or superior occurrences that escape state control (Auyero 2012). Refugee claimants experience deferrals in their process depending on external situations such as global pandemics, new conflicts and wars and the increase in the number of people asking for protection. Those situations affect them not only in their nature – global pandemics can even be more dangerous for people living in extreme conditions of liminality – but also in their process of waiting because it takes the responsibility out of the hands of the state and places it in extraordinary events beyond human control. An example of this was the COVID-19 pandemic that many women identified in their interviews.

The confusion described by Auyero (2012) as the contradictory and puzzling messages during the waiting period helps to create a zone of uncertainty and ambiguity over those who are waiting, mixed with delaying and rushing, creating an environment of punitive waiting, which at times have small rewards but in general dominates people's lives. For refugee claimants, their liminal lives are dominated by uncertainty and ambiguity and sometimes, receiving a notification or a hearing summons can be taken ingeniously as the end of the process without suspecting that the waiting incertitude will be worst because there is not anything else they can do to be part of the decision or to know how the process is going. This is especially true when people do not receive an answer after the

hearing and must wait an indefinite time to have an answer without the hope of agency that the hearing may have.

Similarly, the politics of waiting fits in perfect standing with the liminal state described above. Indeed, waiting experiences place people into suspense and uncertainty, which can be seen as a manifestation of temporal liminality even if they belong to the state and can exercise their rights with no restrictions. The phase of waiting describes the liminal stage where it is also a timing phase of transition, time, and power; more time goes together and represents power structures.

However, differently from the original description of liminality, which, as has been shown, tends to be transitional between two stages, the liminal refugee claimant also experiences the punitive character of waiting, which refers to "the most extreme forms when the person is not only kept waiting but also it is kept ignorant as to how long he must wait" (Auyero 2012:79). This waiting "uncertainty" affects every part of the being or asylum seekers because people are never sure if they can start an integration process, if they can imagine a future and a sense of stability in the new place, and if they will have to restructure one more time their life in order to achieve safety. In addition, waiting also can turn into an arbitrariness process when they are not quite sure of what is expected of them during the process. As has been discussed, the lack of knowledge of the system and the social institutions of the host societies become the process of adjudication refugee status and resettlement contradictory and arbitrary. "People are kept in the dark regarding the length of their wait and the exact paperwork needed for a successful application. The not quite knowing is coupled with a radical arbitrariness regarding ever-changing procedures and the absolute lack of a predictable waiting period" (Auyero 2012:79).

Waiting also establishes an ontological relation of domination which, in the end, is its main goal: to establish who is in power or what is the power and who must subsume it. In

other words, waiting works as an exercise of power and is also a method to create ontological structures of domination, where the dominated assume, re-create, and coexist with the state and its structures of control. The mechanisms of power described by Foucault (1995) help to understand how people incorporate the control of power, even sometimes reproducing it.

Another fundamental part of waiting, especially in the liminal zone in which the refugee claimants are constantly located, is the temporal anguish of waiting and the worry of wasting time. This is especially true in the youth population who see how their dreams and expectations are displaced day by day. In these situations, the idea of the future, such as something better than the present and past, becomes blurry, and there is no difference between them. Every day is the same while people are waiting. This is seen in refugee camps, where there is no hope of returning or getting away from their asylum; similarly for claimants since they do not have access to all the services that the state offers, even the basic ones such as formal education and job employment and universal healthcare. Their worries about wasting time are increased with their lack of legal status. Young people tend to address this situation because they are placed in a nowhere situation that takes productive years of their lives without any certainty that it is worthwhile. In this situation, the easy way to access different activities is through volunteering, which in most cases, is an easy access to networks and work experience. However, as time passes and expectations increase, the volunteer work cannot satisfy basic needs, especially when there are families and kids.

However, during the process there is a moment where the passive action of waiting becomes an active action. Manpreet K. and Andreas (2018) explain the different types of waiting, especially the difference between *waiting for* and *waiting to* which corresponds to the level of agency that people have as they wait. For them, *waiting for* is subjugation

to a superior power that decides people must wait as a symbol of domination similar of what Auyero (2012) explores in his book. On the contrary, *waiting to* correspond to a level of agency that people can experience and makes the waiting time more manageable. In this sense, after their claim is rejected, claimants may turn the *waiting for* period into a *waiting to* that allows them to think about their options and based on that make decisions according to their circumstances.

In summary, waiting is fundamental to the refugee and asylum adjudication process. It is the cornerstone of the experience, which rather than being neutral, has its *raison d'être* in power relations and domination structures. People who face it experience ambiguity and uncertainty about not only their claims but also of their own nature, such as not knowing when it will end or what procedures can make it faster. In addition, uncertainty is faced as well, not only regarding their claims but also with their future and plans of life. The experience of waiting is doubtlessly an exercise of power that perpetuates structural inequalities in the host states.

Hermeneutics of suspicion, ethical witnessing and arbitrariness in the hearing

The cornerstone of refugee and asylum adjudication system is the oral hearing where refugee claimants present their narratives of persecution to a state representative

(adjudicator) who will decide if they have a well-founded fear that precludes them from returning to their country and therefore be granted the non-refoulement principle.³⁵

Originally, the refugee and asylum adjudication system was supposed to be ruled by the UHNCR, a supranational authority that would be a neutral decision maker in granting protection claims. However, as part of the sovereignty of nation states to decide who enters and remains within their territory, it was established that state representatives made the final decision for the claims in quasi-judicial organisms that similarly impose the procedures and guidelines to recognize someone as a protected person (Maitland 2018). Certainly, these decisions have to be in accordance with the Refugee Convention and the UHNCR directions, which in many cases can also grant the status when the country still does not have established procedures.

UNHCR remains the second largest adjudicator of refugee status in the world, after South Africa. In 2014 it issued 134,500 decisions out of 233,500 applications, and in 2015 the number of decisions rose to 135,900 out of 257,600 applications received, while in 2014, there was a backlog of 303,000 applications pending, and this number increased to 460,000 in 2016 (Maitland 2018: 18).

Similarly, it was established worldwide that the process must be equal and have neutral treatment assuring that despite the claim or claimant, it should rely on an oral hearing where people can present and defend their application. In Western jurisdictions, however,

³⁵ This legal principle prohibits states from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment, or other serious human rights violations. Under international human rights law, the prohibition of refoulement is explicitly included in the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).

there is no consensus about which body should be in charge of the process varying the organisms and, therefore, the procedures. In the United States, for example, it is the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). In Canada, it is the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) along with the Refugee Protection Division (RDP). In the United Kingdom, the Home Office, which in conjunction with immigration matters, also takes care of security, drugs policy, crime, counterterrorism, etc. ('Gov UK- About us' 2022).

In all of these cases, the cornerstone is the refugee oral hearing, where it is decided after listening to the claimants and evaluating the evidence if the state accepts or denies the petitions and allow people to resettle in the territory. The hearing then becomes an immigration process where the right of resettlement is granted, allowing people to stay or, on the contrary, denying their permanency in the country. In this regard, far from being neutral, this is a process of power that contains some mechanisms to establish who is worthy of state protection and therefore being admitted in the country. The first and most important mechanism is the controversial nature of the process which places the claimants under suspicion and departs from the assumption their narrative is false. The hermeneutics of suspicion ((Lawrance and Ruffer 2015) tries to catch those who want to take advantage of the benevolence of the system. The second-place mechanism is the listening to their narratives and experiences without ethical witnessing, as a result of which the claimant may be revictimized, turning the hearing into a dehumanizing step of the process. Finally, the third mechanism refers to the subjectivity of each representative making decisions based on their own bias and assumptions regarding the claimants.

As a power depiction, the hearing can be seen as a performance where everyone acts according to their role within the possibilities this one offers. The adjudicator, as a representative of the state and the host society, tries to elucidate if the narrative the claimant presented before the hearing and defended during it has grounds in reality and

can be considered authentic. They use the written and oral narrative to find discrepancies within the story and confront the claimant about what should be done when someone's life is at risk. The proofs are the second resource to determine if the claim is valid and works in support of the story. The claimants perform their duty of convincing the adjudicator that their narrative is real and the risk they may face if they return to their natal countries. As the adjudicator assumes they are lying, the hearing is supported by an idea of the hermeneutics of suspicion, which makes the process adversarial and highly stressful for people (Lawrance and Ruffer 2014).

The hermeneutics of suspicion is a term coined by Paul Ricœur (1975) to describe a skeptical way of interpretation that tries to find and expound the hidden and not obvious meanings in a message.

As a method of interpretation, the hermeneutics of suspicion exhorts not to take people's statements, interpretations and motives at face value, but instead interpret data beyond their surface or appearance in order to reveal their hidden, deep, true meaning. (Mathieu 2015)

This idea is used in the hearing to decipher if what the claimant is asserting has grounds in the reality and the person truly need protection or on the contrary the person is a bogus who want to use the refugee and asylum adjudication system as an immigration pathway. (Tomkinson 2018) The adjudicator, based on the idea the claimant can be lying, tries to test the narrative to reveal its trustiness by asking convoluted questions and what women described as "trying to make us contradict what we just said." This turns a humanitarian process into an adversarial and accusatorial procedure. "I found the hearing a traumatic process. It is not only the fear of the hearing. It is that the adjudicator always wants you to fail" (Piedad).

If the reason for using hermeneutics of suspicion in the hearing is to prevent false claims that use the refugee adjudication system as an immigration pathway, it is possible then to elucidate that the role of the adjudicator is not related to the protection of human rights. Instead, they become an immigration filter that may substantiate their decisions concerning protecting the immigration system and the people it lets it in (Hardy 2003).

The adjudicator role during the hearing is also to represent the society and its core values (Gold 2019) which are crossed not only by ethical principles, but also prejudices and bias about the claimants (FitzGerald 2020). Indeed, this system has an exceptional ability to select immigrants based only on the assumptions made regarding their ethnicity and country of origin. Different from other immigration programs, the refugee hearing is the only one that does not take for granted the educational level or working skills to provide points and evaluate the admission of the person. In other words, the selection criteria tend to be more subjective than other immigration procedures. However, it does not mean that particular assets such as education, class or gender are not considered as well, and in some cases, can be determinants for the process. For instance, one woman in relation to her hearing told me that due to the interpreter being late, she was allowed to present her hearing in English for thirty minutes. There were never any direct questions from the adjudicator about the narrative, instead, he [the adjudicator] asked her about her professional background and why she was able to speak very good English. After that, she was accepted.

Similarly, the lawyer's hands-off attitude during the hearing and in previous meetings (except for the explanation of how to behave in front of the adjudicator) may suggest a similar approach to the claimants, who, rather than being people with traumatic histories of fleeing, they turn into files, numbers and cases. This can be considered in facts such as: getting late to the hearing, not translating accurate information, not providing essential

documents to the adjudicator, not intervening in the hearing or written narrative, etc. All of these acts are described by women as: it seems they do not care about us.

The interpreter may also act in this way by providing simple translations creating a basic communication bridge where both parts can merely recognize what they are saying; or they may play a more active role as a mediator that not only portrays the words but also provides cultural meanings that both parties can understand. It is interesting to see in the interviews the different experiences women had depending on the interpreter's ethnic background. Those whose first language was Spanish and were coming from any Latin American country seemed to be helpers trying to elucidate the meaning of the words over those whose first language was English and seemed not to care about the context or correct interpretation of the narrative. In the second case, there is carelessness towards the claimants and their right to be listened to and understood regardless of their language. Unfortunately, this role of interpreters has been depicted as secondary in the refugee adjudication process in spite of its central function of effective communication. Inghilleri (2005) describes the importance of the translators during the process as a bridge that encloses two spheres and transmits their interests to each other. However, under a hermeneutics of suspicion procedure, this communication bridge can also be traumatic and revictimize the claimant who is narrating the narrative.

Revictimization is the second mechanism of power depicted in the refugee hearing, where even though it is depicted as a humanitarian and caring process to protect people's lives its outcome can be the revictimization of the claimant, turning the process into a more traumatic experience. Lawrance and Ruffer (2014) compare the hearing oral narrative to a rape victim narrative. In both cases, the story must be repeated to different state actors who, in many cases, have not had any training in respect to listening and judging the situations according to their own cultural bias; additionally due to the nature

of the experience, the content may change in every retelling with new memories or things that people may prefer not to tell, which in both cases can bring severe consequences due to the "lack" of uniformity of the stories (Lawrance and Ruffer 2014).

This situation increases the suspicion, which in the case of the refugee and asylum adjudication process may mean the claim's failure. Additionally, there are some experiences that, due to their nature, people want to keep apart from them and try to forget, especially when those confront their perceptions of gender, class and age. For instance, a man who usually lives in a dominant male society may feel powerless and weak narrating a story of rape which could denote a loss of his status of power, and the breadwinner would not want to tell his experience, keeping it apart and leaving a gap challenging to explain but still valid.

The lack of witnessing and listening also creates an environment of insecurity and difficulty in the process of refugee and asylum adjudication. The claimants not only feel their stories are not believed but also that the state and its representatives are playing with them and their trauma depiction. The refugee and asylum hearing not only revictimizes people but also perpetuates structural inequalities in a system that was created in theory to overcome the high rates of displaced people. The system as it is planned does not contradict the institutionalized order; on the contrary, it works as a continuum that preserves the same power and social structure. In other words, it does not follow the humanitarian and philanthropical objectives for what it was created; on the contrary, it works as a revictimizing and traumatic immigration filter.

The third power mechanism of the refugee hearing is denoted by the subjective decisions that adjudicators may take. Even though the system proclaims its objectiveness and fairness, it is ruled by humans, and as socially constructed beings, they tend to create assumptions and beliefs about their relations with others. According to Colaiacovo

(2013), the adjudicators' past experiences, physical and ethnic characteristics, and educational background have a significant impact on their decisions regarding the refugee status hearing. This shows that differently from what it has been argued regarding the claimant's background, the adjudicators' background also affects the hearings and can play an important role in the determination of someone as a protected person. For instance, the adjudicator's gender may play a role if he is a man and the claimant is a single mother, or if the adjudicator has a law or related degree and has had training in discovering the facial gestures of someone who is lying. These characteristics may play a special and undermining role during the process that also denotes power relations due to the disparities of the adjudicator's cultural, economic, and social capital over the claimants who, beyond being asylum seekers, are also newcomers and liminal personas for the host society.

Ramji-Nogales, Schoenholtz, and Schrag (2007) also argue that the decision can be influenced by the random selection process, which can make a difference in the determination process. According to them, "In many cases, the most important moment in an asylum case is the instant in which a clerk randomly assigns an application to a particular asylum officer or immigration" showing how the claimants are subjected to random events in the power process that the refugee hearing is.

Another other important factor is the assumptions that the adjudicators have regarding the claimants, which in many cases represent the host society's beliefs and biases. Declaring some claimants as fake may target people from the same country as bogus as well by the same adjudicator, or even having bad personal experiences may affect how the person relates to the applicants of a particular country (Colaiacovo 2013). This is also compromised by the level of acceptance that a society has. When the cultural and ethnic differences are celebrated, the adjudicator may consider these differences as an asset and

rule a favourable decision for a foreigner that does not share similar features with the host country. However, when society is more closed and more reluctant to assimilate other perspectives, and the adjudicator represents this standpoint, there is a huge risk that the claim will be filed under the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ramji-Nogales et al (2007) explain also how the rates of acceptance in the U.S. asylum system vary among adjudicators who have immigration experience backgrounds over those who do not.

Additionally, these positions of embracing the difference over those that do not are also reflected in the effort to understand people's contexts and institutions. There is significant anthropological debate about whether cultural relativism can be applied to spaces such as the refugee and asylum adjudication process (Inghilleri 2005). What for many can be perceived as a "normal" and "obvious" way to act and behave can be considered by others as weird, strange, and therefore suspicious. This is a massive problem in the refugee hearing, where the adjudicators make decisions based on Western assumptions of what is correct and incorrect and do not consider the claimant's perspective. This is also a problem of not knowing formal or informal institutions that people are an apart of, a problem that arises from both sides and therefore creates a lack of communication of what one side is trying to explain, and the other is trying to ask or understand. As stated above, the usual secondary role of the interpreter is essential to close this communication gap, but also, the lawyer's performance can help the claimants to navigate and understand the social institutions of the host society and the refugee and asylum adjudication system. However, it is usually the claimants who must learn how the institutions work and what is acceptable and considered good, changing and adjusting their experiences to fit into the model for being accepted and not from the state perspective and its representatives who impose their truth and viewpoint as the only possible way to exist in their world.

In summary, the refugee and asylum adjudication system works as a power mechanism between the national state and the foreigners who want to find safety and resettle within its national borders. The first power mechanism is the controversial nature of the refugee hearing based on a hermeneutics of suspicion where the claimant is a "liar" until they prove the opposite turning the humanitarian nature of the process into a traumatic immigration filter. This unequal situation carries on the second power mechanism in which the claimants, instead of being recognized for their traumas and experiences, are revictimized, turning the process into another traumatic event they must face. Finally, the third mechanism takes the presumptions of the adjudicators over the claimants as a bias that denied the process only based on racist, ableist and chauvinist assumptions. These expressions of power in the process also represent the most fundamental values of the host society and state, and all of them can act either to perpetuate the power structure or, on the contrary, exercise their right of disagreement.

The refugee and asylum adjudication process through women's eyes.

Gender is an essential analytical tool for observing and understanding social phenomena. The experiences and perspectives of the same social event may vary depending on gender and the social constructions that have been assigned to it (Patterson and Veenstra 2016). In the refugee and asylum adjudication system, the gender of the claimant may determine the process and its outcome in some moments. Nayak (2015) argues the lack of gender and women lens as a criterion in the refugee determination system as a problem in the credibility of the narratives and, therefore, a bias that affects hearing results and puts women's lives in danger.

However, as asylum seekers try to prove their credibility and the legitimacy of their gender-based claims, they face the harrowing and difficult task of

convincing immigration officials or judges that gender violence is not a personal or unfortunate problem but constitutes persecution.

In the case of Colombian women refugees in Canada, it is imperative to clarify to the reader that this is not a comprehensive gender analysis of the process; instead, it is an enunciation of the main points highlighted by the women that were expressly different from their male counterparts. In this sense, even though women's experiences constituted the narratives, the data did not show explicit information on how women lived the experiences compared to men or gender-diverse populations. To do so, it would be necessary to contrast more varied narratives that include men's and gender-diverse perspectives with those that the women presented for this research.

Among the women I worked with, there were three main points that came up related to their gender and the social construction created around it. The first is their role as a mother, a common feature among them and their first identification signal. Second, they identified a switch of the main breadwinner role with their partners, which in an immigration experience may become an empowered situation. The third is the social construction of how the genders should bear feelings of anxiety and powerlessness.

Every interviewed woman identified herself as a mother. Therefore, their narratives were closely related to their children, which in all cases were the determinant in their decision to flee. For them, their priority was and still is their children and their wellbeing, even if it means they have to start again in a new country and overcome the process of waiting, anxiety and powerlessness. Lucía told me:

Every process has been borne only for them [their children]; we as parents must understand that in this country, the future belongs to them, and we have

everything to support that, even if it means going back in our careers and professional lives. They are worthy of every effort.

This feeling is similar in all other interviewed women who even based their identity as a mother instead of other features. Their children are an essential component of their narratives; in fact, many of them feel that the outcome of their cases was based on their children and their ability to contribute to the system once they have been resettled. Piedad, for instance, related: “this system needs our kids. I think that is why many families are resettled because they have kids.”

The second point highlighted by the women was their ability to find jobs before their husbands, which gave them autonomy, and somehow, it was a process of empowerment. The ease to first find jobs is related to their role and the activities commonly associated with it. Cleaning jobs are the first employment option for many refugee claimants, especially for women who are socially associated with that kind of activity. During the interviews, women narrated that despite those kinds of jobs being under the table and paying less than what had been established, it gave them autonomy over their money, providing an empowerment process. This is especially relevant during the period when claimants are still beneficiaries of welfare which homogenizes the families and places one person, usually the man, as the primary recipient and head of the house, giving all of the payment to him. Women related that having a job not only increased the household income but also provided them independence in relation to their husbands. Rosa, for instance, said: “Despite my age, I have had some jobs cleaning where I could earn some money for my things, and I did not have to ask him for everything.”

English proficiency also makes a difference in getting a job. Patricia, a teacher of languages in Colombia, was the first to obtain a job thanks to her ability to communicate.

She told me: “I was the only one who spoke the language, then I was the first to obtain a job and provide for the house.”

The final point that the women emphasized was the social construction of how to deal with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and powerlessness; for them, actions such as crying and being visibly worried were mechanisms to show the discomfort of the waiting and the concerns they were facing and somehow cope with them. This distinguished them from their male counterparts, who, due to social constructions of the Latin American “macho,” were not able to express what they were feeling. It is especially interesting that in the only interview where one of the women’s husbands was present; he said very expressively:

The process was easier to bear for them [his wife and daughters] because they could cry and express their discomfort. In my case, I was feeling everything, but I had to remain calm because that is how the family works; I had to be their support.

Similarly, during the interviews, many women said: “you know, as a woman, we like to cry:”; “I was crying to the whole audience, maybe it’s because I am a woman,”; “I could not speak, when everything was done, it is maybe because I was born in May and the month is for the mothers that like to cry.” The social construction about how genders can bear difficult situations was constantly present in the narratives through random sentences that, in many cases, the interviewee did not notice; however, I, as a woman and researcher, did see them.

In summary, during the interviews, there were three main points highlighted by the women related to their gender role: motherhood and the importance of the wellbeing of their children; their ability to find a job first that allows them to have independence; and

their feelings and reactions about the process and how it is experienced depending on the social constructions of gender. However, a deeper and comprehensive analysis of these points that allow understanding of how their gender explicitly shapes the process would require comparing it with other gender perspectives.

Conclusions and recommendations

Women´s recommendations

At the end of their interview, all participants had the option of offering recommendations to someone else who would go through the process or was going to start it. In this section, I summarize those by compiling their words into four main categories: (i) the worth of experience, regardless of the feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness and anxiety; (ii) the importance of being aware of the barriers during the integration process which for them, after the refugee adjudication process, have been a daily challenge; (iii) finding a good lawyer who can help and provide true and appropriate information for their case; and (iv) the relevance of their family, friends and close people for thriving during both the refugee adjudication and the integration process.

Concerning the worthiness of the experience, all women agree that despite the difficulties of the refugee process, it is possible to face and surpass it. They express the happiness they felt after being approved and the safety they already have, not only in relation to the risk of being killed, tortured or persecuted, but also in their plans and economic stability. They agree that Canada is a rich country that does not face the same poverty and inequality levels as Colombia, allowing them to make plans for their future and their kids' future. Indeed, the first answer to what you would say to someone who will face the same process was: Do it! (Que le haga!)

Similarly, their answers centered on their ongoing challenges after the hearing and the favourable decision. The second recommendation was to be aware that the easiest part is the hearing; after that, they have to start from zero, “rebirth” in a new society where they must learn a new language, reinvent their professional careers, return to school and experience the feeling of not belonging has been the most commonly mentioned

problems they have had during their stay in Canada, overcoming the difficulties of being a non-white foreigner. This recommendation was mainly by the women who have been in Canada for more than ten years and have faced discrimination, especially those that identify as a visible minority. They all recommend being aware that the process is not only the hearing or learning English but also trying to belong to Canadian society.

With respect to finding good legal advisors or lawyers that can guide them through the process, the women recognized their importance during the process and how their performance could affect them positively or negatively during the hearing. Even one of them recommends paying a specialized lawyer instead of relying only on the legal aid lawyer, who, in her words: “is only sitting around waiting for the payment by the government.” Similarly, they mentioned studying very carefully not only the narrative they have to present but also the process itself and what kind of questions the adjudicator may ask. Everyone agreed that there is a reasonable likelihood of getting a successful response if people understand the process and how they should act. They also recommend asking the lawyer questions about the process and during the hearing to speak from the heart, because, despite the language, “people always will understand the truth of the heart.”

Finally, the last recommendation was to trust in family, friends and the closest circle as a safe space where you can cope and overcome difficult situations. All the women, including single mothers, agreed on the importance of their family and friends in the process. The women narrated that the people closest to them were the key element to overcoming all the difficulties and facing all the challenges that the process imposed. They stated how difficult it is to go through the system alone, which is why they recommend strengthening community ties. In the same way, all the participants mentioned the importance of their children as the motivation to ensure the process

succeeds; they specified that although it has been an arduous process, the choice to flee was the best decision they made for their children, so they can see a better future. And for them, they would go through the same process once again. This agreement is based on their role as mothers and caregivers that outweigh other functions they may have.

Conclusions

Rather than the institutional and bureaucratic process, the refugee and asylum adjudication process is an experience of power for the people who live through it, as they experience waiting, arbitrariness and uncertainty from the state sovereignty. Since the beginning when the refugee status is claimed at the border or inland, there are power mechanisms over the claimants that establish their worthiness to enter and remain into the country. Not everyone is allowed to cross the border and claim refugee status, especially since 9/11 when there was a securitization of the physical state starting with the borders. The Safe Third Country agreement is an example of this affecting principally people who live in the Americas.

In general, the literature review for this thesis was useful to support the point of the refugee and asylum adjudication process as a process of power over the claimants. The concept of liminality (Van Gennep 1908; Turner 1970) was used to exemplify the state where refugee claimants are placed after they make the claim and have the oral hearing; a limbo stage where they do not belong to anywhere and there is no certainty for the future. Because they cannot start a full integration process due to their condition of liminal persona, they do not have the same rights and duties as the rest of the community. They are outsiders waiting for a state decision about remaining in the country, and contrary to what the theory says, even when they pass the process, they are not going to be fully accepted and integrated. There are other structural barriers such as ethnic background,

language, class, gender, disabilities and age preventing them from being fully incorporated.

Similarly, during the liminal period, one of the main features was the waiting time, which was a determinant component of women's experiences. In that way, Auyero (2012) and Bourdieu (2000) offered a valuable understanding of time as a domination tool used by the state to generate subjection and powerlessness over people. These power expressions were always presented in the women's experiences and described by them as elements of anxiety and anguish. Overall, the claimants face waiting periods in six instances: 1) claiming refugee status at the border or inland with the CBSA agents; 2) waiting for their legal refugee claimant document; 3) waiting for the oral hearing summons; 4) waiting for the adjudicator, lawyer and interpreter in their hearing; 5) waiting for a hearing outcome; and 6) waiting for the formal written decision, allowing them to start their resettlement process. Nonetheless, and regarding the same point, Manpreet and Andreas (2018) also offered an excellent tool to understand the agency of claimants during the waiting process, which can be seen and understood during the hearing preparation and when the hearing outcome is negative. They start to think about their future, knowing that their stay in Canada is jeopardized.

The oral hearing becomes the central cornerstone of the process, it is an experience of the state capacity to influence people's lives. However, rather than being a monolithic and static structure, it is nourished with the adjudicators' subjectivities that prevent establishing a single hearing structure and criteria for admissibility. The mechanisms of power are displayed throughout the hearing through the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1975) and arbitrariness, which locate claimants as bogus and target them as fake under the host society's perspective. In other words, rather than being a neutral decision maker, the oral hearing is crossed by subjectivities, bias and assumptions that sometimes

make the process seem an immigration filter rather than a humanitarian procedure that defends people's lives and human rights. In this regard, the contributions of Dorothy Smith (2005) about institutional ethnography become essential to understand that the Canadian refugee and asylum adjudication process is not fair and objective as it appears to be and that people who face it have a different perspective of its role model conception worldwide.

In this way, it is possible to see from an anthropological perspective of the state, how the refugee adjudication process is an entity shaped by multiple relations that affect and control in some way the life and the decisions of the people who live under its territory regardless of their place of birth. In other words, the nation state is still determinant in the social processes, especially in those related to immigration where its sovereignty to decide who enters and remains within the national borders seems too inalienable.

Nevertheless, it is also important to mention that these "domination" tools are not always negative, implying undesirable feelings, there are also some aids that also control people's lives. For instance, Ontario Works restrictions of not working while claimants are receiving economic aid become a passive power tool that has positive impacts on people's lives. Thanks to this help, they are able to pay for basic needs. Similarly, the legal aid funding that pays for a lawyer and legal advice despite the hands-off attitude from these representatives. In these ways, the state enables as well as dominates.

Another important point to highlight is the bonds claimants created during the process, especially those linked by love and care ties. Family, friends and the same language community then become a safe space for coping during the adjudication process and their integration and resettlement process. This is particularly true for the women, who from a gender perspective may face the process differently from what their male counterparts do, especially with their role as mothers and caregivers and the social constructions given to

their gender on how to bear difficult experiences. However, it is important to not romanticize these ties, especially with the community, which in many cases can act as the opposite. This is especially true in the case of the Colombian women, who after being born and raised in a polarized and violent society may have different experiences and ways to see and understand the world, that are not compatible with their compatriots.

The research also shows the importance of understanding the refugee and asylum adjudication process from an anthropological perspective where there is a privilege of understanding through the lens of people's experiences rather than the institutional process itself, as highlighted by Colaiacovo (2013), Lawrance and Ruffer (2015), Rehaag (2007), and Tomkinson (2018). Under this perspective it is possible then to notice that the process is itself an experience that marks and shapes people's lives rather than a bureaucratic step. It also provides insight into why the experience becomes traumatic and places people at risk, even though their lives are safe after fleeing. And most importantly, they dispute the hegemonic narratives that usually are presented with numbers and statistics that do not show what it is like to be a refugee claimant in a globalized and interconnected world that is still characterized by deep inequalities.

Finally, as a researcher I would also point out that an anthropological study of the agents involved in the process is still needed. Research that focuses on the experiences that the representatives of the state at the borders and inland (CBSA, IRB) have with the Colombian women that arrive to claim refugee status would be valuable, as well those of the lawyers and the translators – and undoubtedly of the adjudicators who, as has been argued through this thesis, are full of subjectivities and assumptions about the claimants. Similarly, a deep gender analysis that allows us to compare and understand the different experiences people face depending on their gender would provide additional insight. The narratives of the women's experiences and the theoretical approaches presented through

this thesis support the notion of a power imbalance displayed in the hearing. This depends on many factors such as the relationship between lawyer and adjudicator, good interaction with the translator, time of the hearing, and most importantly, the subjectivity of the adjudicator. That is why it is essential to build knowledge from their perspective and explore firsthand how their decisions are made. This is also important from the perspective of an anthropology of the state, which as this thesis argues does not see state spaces and encounters as expressing a monolithic structure controlled by the big “Leviathan” in the Hobbesian sense. On the contrary, many variables can influence state processes during the everyday interactions between various actors working for or paid by the state and people whose lives are profoundly affected by the decisions that are made.

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Appendix

Research Ethics Approval



Date: 24 June 2021

To: Dr. Tania Granadillo

Project ID: 118736

Study Title: Narratives of Colombian's women refugee claimant in Canada

Short Title: Colombian's refugee women

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegated

Meeting Date: 09/Apr/2021 12:30

Date Approval Issued: 24/Jun/2021 11:13

REB Approval Expiry Date: 24/Jun/2022

Dear Dr. Tania Granadillo

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
2.4 INTERVIEW GUIDE	Interview Guide	22/Mar/2021	1
LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT ENG VERSION 3	Written Consent/Assent	22/Jun/2021	3
VERBAL CONSENT INTERVIEW ENG VERSION	Verbal Consent/Assent	22/Jun/2021	3
LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT ESP VERSION 3	Translated Documents	22/Jun/2021	3
VERBAL CONSENT INTERVIEW ESP VERSION	Translated Documents	22/Jun/2021	3
FLYER - COLOMBIAN WOMEN REFUGE'S NARRATIVES IN CANADA _ENG_ V3	Recruitment Materials	22/Jun/2021	3
FLYER - COLOMBIAN WOMEN REFUGE'S NARRATIVES IN CANADA _SPA_ V3	Translated Documents	22/Jun/2021	3

Documents Acknowledged:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
CERTIFICATE PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID CARING FOR OTHERS	Other Materials	22/Mar/2021	1
CERTIFICATE PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID SELF CARE	Other Materials	22/Mar/2021	1

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Camila Natalia Parra Carrillo

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: National University of Colombia
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2014-2018 B.A. – Political Science

The University of Western Ontario
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2020-2022 M.A. – Anthropology

Honours and Awards: Regna Darnell Award
2021, 2022

Related Work Experience Teaching Assistant
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2022- 2022