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## Perceptions of Settlement Workers on the Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees

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

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## Abstract

Syrians account for a large proportion of recent refugee migrants to Canada. Settlement workers are the main point of contact for refugees; they remain with these individuals from the day of arrival until they have successfully settled. They are not only providers of information and assistance to meet basic needs but carry the responsibility of ensuring cultural integration. For this, it is crucial to understand the intersectional identities of the incoming migrant; coupled with traumatic experiences of fleeing from war, carrying cultured gender roles, and dealing with the anxiety and stress of relocation. The current study describes the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees as perceived by settlement workers. A qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze ten participants' responses. Five themes emerged from the data: premigration experiences: ethnic identity and the Syrian conflict, settlement needs and challenges, settlement services support, personal strength and resilience, and acculturation experiences. These themes reflect the key contributions of settlement experiences on the bicultural identity formation process.

## Keywords

Syria, refugees, women, settlement workers, identity, culture, qualitative

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Since World War II, the total number of refugees worldwide has exceeded 50 million for the first time, largely due to the Syrian Civil War, making it the biggest humanitarian crisis of our era (UNHCR, 2014a). According to the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (2017a), in 2017, 65.6 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide because of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations alone. The Syrian Civil War is the largest contributor to the International Refugee Crisis, which includes the movement of large groups of displaced people, the incidents in their country of origin, and problems on the move or problems in the hosting countries after arrival.

**Syrian Civil War.** The Syrian Civil War is an ongoing multi-sided armed conflict in Syria fought between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and his allies, and various forces opposing the government. The unrest in Syria began as protests in Damascus in 2011 against the secular leadership of the President and demands for a democracy (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer & Asare, 2016). The government responded to the protests with violent forces, leading to the formation of rebel groups to gain control of parts of the country (2016). As of February 2016, the Syrian Centre for Policy Research (PBS, 2016) estimated the death toll to be 470,000 people, with 1.9 million wounded. This totals 11.5% of the population who have been either wounded or killed. As a result of the violence, almost half the population has been displaced, seeking refuge in the neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. The UNHCR (2014a) reported that the total number of refugees worldwide exceeds 50 million for the first time since WWII, largely due to the Syrian civil war. As of December 2017, there are 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees, with Turkey being the largest host country with over 3 million Syrian refugees spread over cities and

dozens of refugee camps under the Turkish government authority. In recent years, the countries hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees also introduced a number of restrictions on new arrivals, with Jordan sealing their border in 2016 due to security concerns.

**Migration to Canada.** Due to restrictive border management by neighbouring countries, few Syrians are able to leave Syria. In this case, third country resettlements became popular and essential, with approximately 77,000 resettlement submissions made by UNHCR in 2016, and 48,000 cases were approved for departure (UNHCR, 2019). Since 1959, Canada has resettled almost 700,000 refugees, making it one of the top resettlement countries in the world. With over 40,000 Syrian refugees welcomed since November 2015 and another 32,000 projected by 2020 (UNHCR, 2017b), the 1971 Canadian multicultural policy will be implemented more than ever. The government maintains three settlement programs; the Government Assisted Refugee (GAR), the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) or the Blended Visa Office Referred Refugees (BVOR). In 2016, the bulk of refugees were sponsored by the government, which was projected to flip in 2018, with 67% PSR, 28% GAR and 5% BVOR, reflecting the increasing commitment of Canadians to volunteer in the resettlement and integration of Syrian refugees. Within the GAR and BVOR programs, the majority of cases are referred by the UNCHR who screen refugees during the registration process and triage women and girls at risk, survivors of violence and/or torture, family reunification, medical needs and children at risk before other individuals. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated (CBC, 2015) that the most vulnerable would be accepted first, including families, children and members of the LGBT communities.

**Settlement Issues.** With the arrival of Syrian refugees, it is crucial that appropriate resources are available for their successful integration. Although the three sponsorship programs secure financial assistance for the first year of resettlement, it is a short period to independently navigate a foreign society, to learn a new language, to establish a source of income and to reconcile the experiences of culture shock. Lindencrona, Ekbaldm and Hauff (2008) described four resettlement stressors: (a) social and economic strain, (b) loss of status corresponding with racism and discrimination, (c) threats and violence, and (d) alienation, all contributing to predictors of mental illness and PTSD symptoms. Therefore, the first few post migration years are crucial in developing healthy coping skills and navigating challenges with effective behavioural and communication patterns, in hand with meeting basic needs (Bemak, Chung, & Pedersen, 2003).

**Settlement in Canada.** Consequently, settlement counsellors who are experienced in resettlement can acknowledge the impact of displacement and traumatic pre-migration experiences on post migration adjustment and adaptation. Hence, resettlement agencies are the first point of contact at the arrival of immigrants and refugees in Canada; they remain with these individuals from the day of arrival until they have successfully settled into the society. They are not only delegates of information and in providing access to basic needs, but also carry the responsibility of ensuring cultural integration within the society. As part of the Settlement Plan (IRCC, 2017a) for PSRs, the document outlines the requirements for appropriate social inclusion which include but are not limited to: airport pickup, safe and private residence, enrolling adults in language training and children into schools, assisting in finding employment, providing community resources, arrange interpreter services, arrange transportation to appointments, relaying information about the health care system and



arranging medical and dental appointments, child care arrangements and application for the child tax benefit. In addition, mental health and counselling services may be needed to provide support to address the barriers and challenges of cultural adaptation.

**Women in War.** Generally, women and children are the largest proportion of displaced people in conflict. Syrian refugee women are relying entirely on internal and international humanitarian assistance. Although all refugee groups have significant needs in resettlement, women's gendered experiences during war and flight, combined with stressors they encounter in exile, result in their needs being qualitatively different from those of men (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). For every one in four Syrian families, women are the sole providers (UNHCR 2014b). They are "forced to live with their children and belongings out in the open sky, braving the harsh weather, rain and cold, and falling prey to sexual exploitation, harassment and sex trade in return for basic aid" (Asaf, 2017). During war and flight, women are at a greater risk of sexual assault and attacks by armed forces, border guards, and refugee camp officials than men. Moreover, these camps are often unfriendly to women and not laid out with gendered needs in mind (Miller et al., 2002). Nevertheless, women's experiences have long been overlooked in favor of a male-centered paradigm that governs the response to survivors of warfare (Comas-Diaz & Jansen, 1995; Sideris, 2003). For this, it is crucial to understand the intersectional identities of the incoming migrant; coupled with traumatic experiences of fleeing from war, carrying cultured gender roles and values, and dealing with the anxiety and stress of relocation.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

There is ample evidence in the literature exploring the general experiences and mental health needs of Syrian refugees, but they lack the richness and complexity of their

experiences due to language barriers. Some settlement workers who are fluent in Arabic are able to address concerns earlier and can provide a complete representation of their experiences. Likewise, as a mental health professional, a holistic understanding of the pre-migration experiences of all group members within a culture are integral to systemically expedite and ease the integration process. This is especially important since a collectivist cultural framework is a basis of Syrian society.

The responsibility of navigating the new context is largely placed on the eldest male within the family who is also the same family member communicating with community agencies where a large part of recruitment for research is done. In these cases, children and women remain part of the vulnerable population even in their host country because their needs and challenges remain unknown. As a result, the general conceptions of refugee resettlement are largely overgeneralized, disregarding the experiences of “vulnerable” groups and erroneously informing best practices for working with the refugee population. The needs and challenges of women who have arrived as refugees from Syria are not well explored in the literature.

Additionally, most studies have focused solely on refugee participants with direct personal experience, but the perceptions of professionals are yet to be explored. This would not only utilize their expertise and professional opinion to fill gaps in knowledge, but also gauge the current knowledge and training of front line workers. To address these limitations, the proposed study taps the expertise of settlement workers who have assisted several families with adjustment to their relocation and, based on their perceptions, identifies particular needs and adjustment to their relocation.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Since migration for Syrian refugees began, Ontario has settled approximately 13,000 (36%) Syrian refugees from 2015-2017 (Friesen, 2017). Most Syrians are settled in major cities such as the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, Ottawa, London, Waterloo, and Windsor. London has made an exemplary effort in welcoming refugees (seventh largest in Canada), with Syrians being the leading immigrant groups in the London census metropolitan area, which includes St. Thomas, Strathroy-Cardoc, and surrounding rural areas (Daniszewski, 2017). The 1,250 GARs, 428 PSRs and 75 BVORs arriving in London, ON since November 2015 are roughly five percent of all Syrian immigrants to Canada, while London only makes up 1.4% of Canada's overall population. There have been approximately 246 Syrian families, made up of three people or more, residing in London since December 2016 (Global News, 2017), with up to eight members in a family residing in Canada.

A majority of Syrian refugees are of Islamic faith and speak Arabic, with the majority not fluent in either English or French (Global News, 2017). Within Canada, approximately 57% of the Syrian refugee population are under age 18, and surprisingly, there are slightly more males than females within this population, even though the Liberal government stated that single males were not going to be considered for the processing because they presented a potential security risk. It is possible that male members of the LGBTQ community could be the reason for these numbers. Lastly, 55% of incoming Syrian refugees have completed their high school diploma or less, and 15% have completed a post-graduate degree or diploma (IRCC, 2017b).

Due to larger Syrian families settling in Canada, they bring with them a stronger sense of Syrian culture and gendered roles. It is generally believed that women bear the major responsibilities for settlement and integration of family members into the receiving society (Naidoo, 2003). Hence, women's experiences are essential to understand during both pre and post migration. One aspect that is central to these experiences is the reconciliation of their sense of self, identity and changes relative to the new context as well as how community services need to be responsive.

In this chapter, the first section presents research on cultural identity development for women, with an emphasis on critical consciousness of racial identity models which encourages intersectionality as a by-product. The second part of this chapter reviews the research on pre and post migration among female Syrian refugees, with an emphasis on the challenges and strengths that inform their sense of self in Canada.

## **Identity**

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said to New York Times Magazine that Canada could be the first post-national state and added "There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada" (Foran, 2016). Canada has been praised around the world for its multicultural policy and efforts to fill geographic space with the diversity of the world. Along with diversity through immigration comes the responsibility of successful integration. A key component of integration is the felt sense of belonging which impacts one's identity. "An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being. If they did not coexist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity" (Connolly, 2002, pg. 64).

*Identity* is shaped by who one is (perception of self) and who one is expected to be (perception of others). The major aspects of identity are located in the societal functions expected of that individual and their internal expectations. Stryker and Burke (2000) co-constructed two important strands of identity theory; the linkages of social structures with identities and the internal process of self-verification which informs identity development. Stryker (2000) explains that individuals take on the behaviors consistent with the structures that exist in their lives. Burke (2000) explains self-verification as individuals having a desire to be seen by others in the same way they see themselves. Each of these concepts relate and complement one another; the relations of social structures to identities influences the process of self-verification, in which the process of self-verification creates and sustains social structures. However, there are challenges to this theory, since each individual holds multiple identities, with each identity having its own meaning and importance within our lives. Moreover, social identity is categorical whereas identity theory focuses on the roles, both having different implications for psychological outcomes. Lastly, it poses a challenge to define identity when self-verification fails; i.e. when one is not viewed in the way they would like to be viewed. This is particularly relevant for individuals changing contexts such as immigration and refugee migration. In a changing context, cultural contrasts prompt people to become reflective about their personal cultural identity, often resulting in a change of worldviews (Arthur, 2000). These reflections introduce identity competition or conflicts that complicate the relationship between commitments to multiple identities, identity salience and self-perception (Reitzes and Mutran 1995; Thoits 1983; Wiley 1991).

An important concept to understand is the feedback cycle that upholds or diminishes various identities contingent on context. Identity salience is defined as the probability that an

identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation (Markus, 1977). Identities are internalized cognitive schemas that provides a framework to interpret experiences, and hence increase sensitivity and receptivity to certain cues of behavior. Thus, identity theorists hypothesized that the higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). In the context of refugee migrants, their collectivist gender roles pre-migration have been salient throughout their socialization, and as a result of migration are threatened in both different and same situations that they are involved in. These changes in socialization, whether in a professional workplace or within one's family, impinge on the individual's self-verification of identity and may create internal conflict.

One difference migrants face is the cultural shock of being in a new context, especially when the migration is occurring from a contrasting cultural orientation. Identity salience becomes an important concept in re-defining one's cultural identity as a result of migration. Phinney (2003) defines cultural identity as consisting of three interrelated components of a sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, the beliefs, attitudes and values related to one's group membership, and feeling about the status of one's group within the larger society. In the situation where an individual migrates, their cultural identity is threatened due to cultural differences in the host country, especially when there is a transition from a majority ethnic population to becoming a minority group. Thus, minority identity development takes place through a reciprocal relationship between one's home culture and the culture of the new society. It is a continuous process of reflecting upon and deriving meaning from one's unique racial, cultural and ethnic identity in response to the

reactions and experiences produced by interactions with members of the dominant groups in society, as well as members of the ‘other’ groups (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1993; Sue & Sue, 2008).

**Development models.** Erik Erikson’s model of human development was expanded to include factors such as race, gender, and sexuality to develop minority identity models. Racial and ethnic identity development models have made significant contributions to understanding the experiences and processes of identity development among people of color. Specifically, the People of Color Racial Identity model by William Cross (1991) focuses on the process by which African Americans come to understand their identity. The Filipino American identity development by Kevil Nadal (2011) highlights the experiences of Filipino Americans in cultural assimilation. Furthermore, a popularized model, the Ethnic Minority Development model by John W. Berry (2005) focuses on immigrant ethnic minorities. Generally, these models describe a transformational process of the attitudes of persons of color from racial or ethnic self-denigration to pride and self-acceptance (Yi & Shorter-Gooden, 1999). The beginning stage is defined as the negative or neutral racial/ethnic self-image which is disrupted by active explorations and gradual rejection of the previous accepted ideal image of “white” culture. The final stage is the acceptance of one’s racial background and respect for the cultural norms of other groups (1999). Parham (1989) has advocated that individuals cycle through some of the stages more than once as a result of contextual events that challenge their ethnic identities. Through these universalizing models, however, within-group differences are not captured, which skews the treatment approach. Four cautions were discussed in Shin’s (2014) dialogue about critical consciousness and will be explained here. These are important considerations when taking into account the use of

racial identity models for professionals and in interpreting experiences of racial minority groups.

**Cautions.** Some cautions against racial/ethnic models include overgeneralization, essentializing, pathologizing and assimilationism. The categorical stage models demand a mechanistic, reductionistic approach to studying complex human processes (Prilleltensky, 1994). This functions with the flawed assumption that all members of a particular group experience and perceive racial issues similarly. This overgeneralization inadequately represents the multifaceted experiences within racial groups and has major political, social, developmental and clinical consequences. The narrow and deficient-oriented theories regarding people of color are termed “master narratives” which overextend and simplifies the richness of groups’ cultural life. This has direct effects on best practices, as it encourages fixed visions of collective identities and reinforces the very hierarchies of difference they are meant to challenge. Another criticism of linear models is the perception that the process is of maturational unfolding, promoting the notion that there is an “ideal” or “normal”, which implicitly pathologizes the diverse life trajectories experienced by individuals. Any deviations from the stages is seen as pathological and reflective of deficits within the individual as opposed to systemic oppression. Lastly, assimilation is the systemic tendency of one culture to negate another (Berbrier, 2004). This is depicted in the phrases commonly used to refer to the final stage such as “identification for or against white culture is no longer an important issue” (Sue & Sue, 2008, p. 213), suggesting individuals are responsible for the oppression they experience. Another important contribution of criticisms is the failure of racial/ethnic models to consider all social identity categories that affect individuals’ lives (Constantine et al., 1998). A crucial part of identity is its distinctness from other identities,



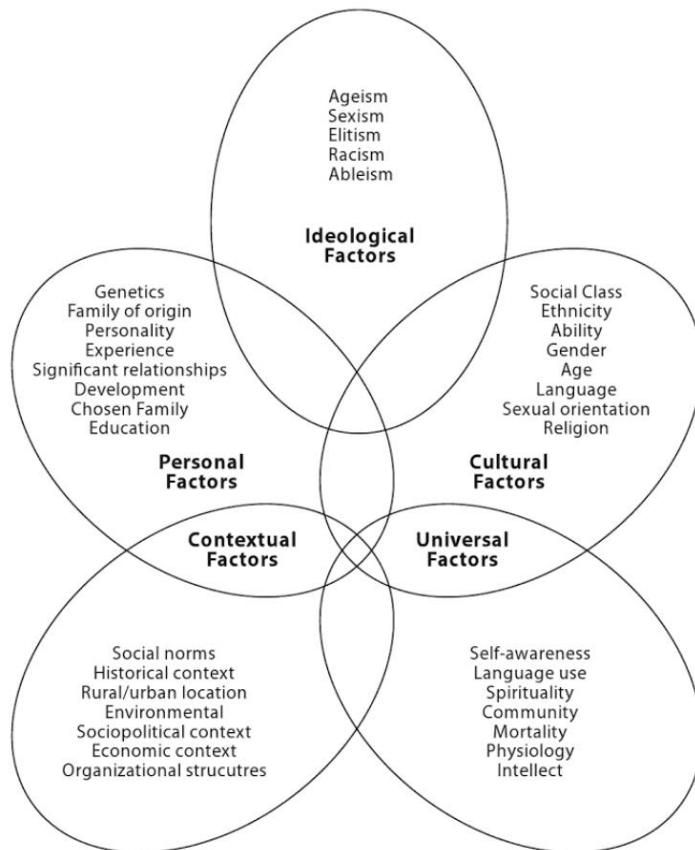
hence, there are endless possibilities. It has been asserted that persons have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

**Intersectionality.** A number of cultural identity models continue to place an emphasis on race and ethnicity and view the various dimensions of culture as fixed, non-interactive, and localized within the individual (Munley et al., 2004). As a result, women of colour, and others who hold multiple, non-dominant identities do not see an accurate and adequate representation of their experiences. Relational-cultural theory (Jordan & Walker, 2004) draws attention to the pervasive influence of culture on women's experiences and development. However, there are gaps in understanding the impact of geographic dislocation on the unique identity experiences of refugee and immigrant women (Brown et al., 2005).

Ludvig (2006) defines intersectionality as “the merging and mingling of multiple markers of difference” (p. 246). Gustafson (2005) challenged the artificial boundaries between gender and racial identity, viewing them as interconnected, where gender informs ethnicity just as ethnicity is shaped by gender. Making connections across multiple identities is essential in disentangling the complications and amplifications of multiple identity cultural oppressions.

Most models that conceptualize cultural identity vary in terms of their focus and degree of integration across various identity factors: cultural factors, personal identity factors, contextual factors, ideological factors, universal factors (Collins & Arthur, 2005). However, as an attempt to understand the intersectional identities one carries, Collins (2010) introduced the metaphor of the kaleidoscope (*Figure 1*) as a means of understanding the fluid, interactional, and multidimensional nature of cultural identity. It was hypothesized that

one identity may unsettle, overshadow, disappear or be rejected in different situations and at different times (Valentine, 2007). Justin (2005) uses the term situational identity to refer to the impact of context on the expression of personal identities for women of color, similar to the concept of identity salience.



*Figure 1. Kaleidoscope of Cultural Identity Factors (Collins, 2010)*

Also, the multidimensional nature of identity encourages the merging of identities termed “hybridity” (Bhabha, 1990), where an individual may simultaneously participate in more than one cultural world or move between them (Barcinski & Kalia, 2005). This is generally the case when women with strongly held cultural identities are met with unforeseen clashing contexts. Within this metaphor, the mirrors representing the various lens each woman applies in defining the complex self-image that results from the mix. Each woman forms her

own cultural identity through internalizing various elements of culture, which evolve, shift and recreate in different context at different times throughout their life. The invisibility of certain cultural identities for some women further complicates the discussion of identity development (Lowe & Mascher, 2001). For example, a Syrian refugee woman is often assumed to carry the role of caretaker in Syria, whereby they are treated as caretakers, but as a result of migration, may explore professional employment, where they choose to identify with their difference. In these instances, they may experience otherness in contexts where they don't fit in (i.e. family) at the expense of sense of belonging within new reinforcing contexts (i.e. at work).

There are no pure identities, when multiplicity, within group diversity and intersecting hybrid identities are factored in (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005). The kaleidoscope is an expression of personal agency of each woman in reacting and acting upon the contexts of her life to shape her own identity and cultural realities (Barcinski & Kalia, 2005). The message of the kaleidoscope is that “no matter how many colours are added or how they are mixed together, it is impossible to create a combination of cultural identity factors that does not result in a beautiful, unique, and valuable woman” (Collins, 2010). Self-definition then becomes core to respecting and valuing each individual's cultural identities. The way in which women, individually and collectively, view their own cultural identities and the meaning they make of these factors in a given social context is more significant than their visible group affiliations (Reynolds & Constantine, 2004). This study will aim to report the unique cultural identity experiences of Syrian refugee women who migrated to Canada as a result of the Syrian crisis. The next part of this chapter will elucidate some of the similar

experiences of Syrian refugee women pre- and post-migration to Canada and the evolving cultural factors that inform the reshuffling of their cultural identity.

### **Migration Experiences**

It has been six years since the Syrian Civil War started, and an increasing number of applications for migration to Canada is representative of the atrocities war victims are driven to flee. In comparison to immigrants who may choose and plan to migrate to another country for a better life, refugees are forced to migrate because of the destruction and threats to safety in their communities. Kunz (1973) describes refugee migration as an involuntary process, during which, if given the choice, refugees would most likely remain in their country, where they were living well-integrated lives. Due to their abrupt departure, it leaves most families with little to no time for planning and preparation about their destination, travel route, and means of travel, forcing refugees to face threats to their safety and psychological and physical danger (Collins & Arthur, 2005). In the general refugee population, forced migration in and of itself is a traumatic event. It is associated with a sense of chaos, an inability to plan, concern for personal safety, and disruptions of life roles and processes that affirm the sense of personal identity and stability (Bemak et al., 2003).

Three stages have considerable potential for traumatic experiences and distress: 1. the pre-migration stage, 2. the migration stage during transit to the new country, and 3. the post migration stage of settlement (Arredondo, 1986). A common feature in all three stages are the occurrence of distressing events that have long term impacts on settlement and acculturative experiences. During the pre-migration stage there are considerable threats to safety of individuals as a result of war and political campaigns such as genocides, killings, war, torture, hunger, homelessness, bombings and psychological and physical violence

(Bemak et al., 2003). Individuals may witness torture and killings. This stage is also marked with deprivation of food, shelter and contact with other people as well as physical injury. In the next stage, migration is coupled with a heightened sense of fear to the means of escaping and the possibility of getting caught. Finally, the post-migration stage is the longest stage, where refugees must simultaneously face the adjustment in a new culture and the grieving process of the homeland, family and life left behind. To exacerbate this process, visible minority status, gender, age and racism all impinge on their adaptation and integration.

**Pre-migration.** Syrian women hold the responsibility of caretaking for families, completing domestic duties such as cleaning, cooking and overall maintenance of the household and sense of community (Olimat, 2014). In Syria, the male members of the household are responsible for supporting the family through work income and providing protection. Women hold multiple roles within the Syrian society such as mother, partner, daughter, grandparent and/or child. Most of these roles interact to reinforce patriarchal values of the society, affecting their sense of cultural identity. As a result of war and displacement, the structural and functional roles of women within the family are susceptible to change especially when the male members are missing or deceased as a result of the conflict. This forces the women to take on responsibilities that were once a man's domain (Shalaby & Marnicio, 2015). An average number of family members a Syrian family head of a household has under her care are 5-6, including children, parents, siblings, and other relatives (UNHCR, 2014c). For these women, life as a refugee may also be about becoming the main breadwinner and caretaker, providing for themselves and their families away from their communities and traditional sources of support (Asaf, 2017).

During the journey to migration, they encounter countless traumatic and distressing events, specifically gender-based violence. Amnesty International (2016) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that interviewed 40 refugee women on their journey to Europe for resettlement. They reported that almost all has said they felt unsafe and threatened at every stage of their journey. They are at great risk of becoming victims to violence, robbery, extortion, threats of rape and sexual assault by smugglers, security guards, policemen and fellow refugees (Asaf, 2017). There are transit centres where men and women sleep together in the same tents with no separate toilets or shower facilities. In the Amnesty (2016) report, women described how they would minimize the risk of assault by not drinking or eating so they wouldn't have to use the toilet. Some would even sleep under the open sky as it was safer than being inside with men (Amnesty International, 2016).

**Gender Based Violence.** Gender-based violence is defined as threats or behaviours targeted at individuals based on their sex (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottmoeller, 2002). Examples of gender-based violence that affects women include domestic violence, sexual abuse or assault, sexual torture, genital mutilation, forced marriages, and forced prostitution (2002). The root cause of domestic violence is often attributed to the unequal status of women (Feseha et al., 2012). The three most prevalent risk factors for women being targeted of domestic violence are growing up in an abusive household, having a partner who is illiterate, and having a partner who abuses substances (2012). Domestic violence is linked to deleterious physical and mental health outcomes such as migraines, sexually transmitted infections, chronic pain, PTSD, suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety (Guruge et al., 2009). Despite these negative consequences, women often feel they have no choice but to stay in the relationship, mainly due to the stigma around these issues of the conservative society

they are a part of (Asaf, 2017). Among cultures with strong patriarchal values, female survivors of rape and their children are often shunned and deeply marginalized by their family and community (Sideris, 2003). Some women express concerns that their partners would retaliate with more violence as a result of disclosing the violence, while others would be afraid to lose their source of protection and financial assistance making them more vulnerable to thefts and assault from other men (Young & Chan, 2015). These relationships have detrimental effects on children. For example, boys who witness their mother being abused develop accepting attitudes towards domestic violence, and later become abusive partners themselves (Holt, 2013).

Another type of violence experienced by Syrian females is survival sex which is a consequence of a desperate need for income to cover their living costs (O'Sullivan & Stevens, 2017). Male members in the Syrian society are a source of financial support for the family, but as a result of the conflict, many women lose this support and must take on the role of protector and provider for their large families. In some cases, Syrian women who struggle to provide basic needs to their children, marry their young 13 to 15 year old daughters with the hopes of giving them protection and a roof over their heads. These child brides are left vulnerable to domestic abuse, poverty, health problems and no opportunity for education (Asaf, 2017).

Alternatively, parents of young children during migration (in refugee camps) are struggling to cope with their challenges such as withdrawal, depression, anxiety, bedwetting, fear of loud noises and nightmares. A study carried out by El-Khani et al. (2017), investigated the experiences of mothers in Syria at refugee camps and their help seeking behaviour for parenting support. In this study, they found that the majority of these women

were widowed or did not know if their husbands were alive. In many cases, they were struggling to cope with their own trauma as well as supporting their children and providing them with effective coping strategies.

**Post-migration.** The resettlement process includes multiple challenges such as meeting their basic needs, learning a new language, being unemployed or underemployed, experiencing discrimination, adopting mainstream cultural norms, worry about safety and well-being of family members left behind, as well as longing to return home (Young & Chan, 2015). Survivor guilt and bereavement follow individuals through the course of forced migration (Bemak et al., 2003). Although settlement services in the host country may help to meet the basic needs and provide community resources, it is essential to understand the experiences of refugees, specifically women who navigate the new culture. Learning a new language can trigger feelings of loss of cultural identity and longing for one's homeland and culture. The frustration results in questioning of one's capacity to master a new language and reduced feelings of competence and self-esteem. Language creates major barriers to receiving health care because of difficulty communicating distress. This may lead to misdiagnosis as well as mistreatment. Children are found to learn a new language quicker due to their interactions in school, hence, role reversals, where children are placed in the position for translating, creating an unusual shift in power in family relationships (Davidson, Murray, & Schweitzer, 2008).

A common presenting concern for refugees are the language skills which are a major barrier to participate in the labour force (Chen, 2008). Ataca and Berry (2002) mention that immigrant and refugee women are less likely to be proficient in either of the official languages of Canada. Women often arrive in the country to resettlement with a lower



education level and with lower literacy (Hou & Beiser, 2006). While some refugee women were employed prior to gaining employment in Canada, many never participated in the formal labour market, either by choice or due to cultural norms (Franz, 2003). However, many refugee women enter the labor force to supplement the family income, whether they are the sole breadwinner or supporting their husband's struggle to find appropriate employment. In the case their husbands are unable to obtain meaningful employment, women are more willing to take up low-skill and low-paying jobs (Young & Chan, 2015). Health risks increase when women are marginalized to work in unhealthy work environments (Kramer, Tracy & Ivey 1999). Another important factor to consider regarding employment in Canada is the economic climate related to competition and resources and the sense of security of other Canadians. The downward mobility many immigrants and refugees face upon arrival to Canada may reflect the dominant group's expectations that newcomers must occupy a lower social position (Reitz, 2001).

Another challenge refugee women commonly experience during resettlement is discrimination. Discrimination is an intentional act that treats individuals unfairly based on their membership in particular social groups, such as gender, ethnicity, immigration status and religion (Edge & Newbold, 2013). Subtle forms are more prominent such as being unfairly dismissed in the workplace, treated rudely or excluded in social contexts (Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007), which in turn causes stress, reduced self-efficacy and self-worth (Kira et al.,2010).

Many refugee women are primarily responsible for the household and childrearing and become stuck with the "triple burden" (Lipson & Miller, 1994). In addition to working and keeping up the domestic responsibilities, they play the additional role of cultural broker

between their partners and children due to acculturation-related conflicts (Zhou & Bankston, 2001). In addition, marital conflicts can arise between marital partners when they follow different acculturation strategies and pathways (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). For refugee men who are underemployed or unemployed must face the reality of their partner's employment and take upon household chores and child caretaking. This shift in gender roles is viewed men as stressful with an experience of loss of status (2012). As refugee women become more acculturated towards the host society culture, many experience more freedom and autonomy in daily choices. In turn, refugee men may become resentful toward their partners as they view their demands as threats to their masculinity. This reversal in gender roles also increases risk for spousal abuse (Harris, Firestone & Vega, 2005).

**Strengths.** “For the women of Syria, experiencing the bitter realities of life as a refugee has awarded them an unexpected side effect – freedom or empowerment” (Asaf, 2017). It seems that regardless of the acculturative stress, females are more receptive to adopting the values of Canadian host society than their male counterparts (Dion & Dion, 2001). This is attributed to the restrictions placed on life choices of females in non-Western cultures, and liberation from rigid cultural roles award them a greater sense of autonomy. Another source of strength for refugees is their families. It has been found that families who arrived together fared better in managing losses than individual refugees, irrespective of the level of challenges experienced (Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, & Morneau, 2001). The exhibited challenges and strengths of refugee experiences have an interdependent relationship between refugees and Canadian society. These strengths, in addition to the diverse cultural experiences translate into exemplary portraits of perseverance, adaptability and resilience within the Canadian society (Marshall et al., 2016). In turn, engaging in

frequent contact with more than one culture equips refugees with skills to survive in larger multicultural societies (van Oudenhoven, 2006).

### **Summary**

How well refugees adapt to their host country is largely dependent on their ability to make sense of their situation and effectively cope with both pre- and post-migration experiences. Arriving in a new context poses two parallel decision for migrants: (1) how much of their unique identity they want to remain, (2) their desired level of interaction with people who do not share their cultural heritage. Literature on adaptation of refugees suggest that integration, retaining culture of origin and host culture, provides the best outcomes and benefits (Kuo, 2014). Refugee women carry multiple identities that inform their sense of self, and as a result of migration these additional roles and expectations are brought to the forefront.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

### **Participants**

All participants were Settlement Workers in a medium sized southwestern city in central Canada who have provided services to Syrian refugees. The agency employing the participants is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to provide a variety of services to its community members. The services include the (1) Orientation and Information, (2) Settlement Workers and (3) Library Worker programs, each tailored to meet the IRCC Immediate Outcomes (2017a). The Settlement Workers provide needs assessments of clients, connect them to available resources and provide guidance to make informed settlement decisions.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited through flyers (see Appendix C) distributed to employees via email inviting settlement workers to participate in a study exploring the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees. The researcher's contact information was listed. The interviews took place at either the participant's office space or the local library group room. The emphasis is placed on the depth and richness of the data versus the representative sample size.

**Demographics.** Ten settlement workers (8 females,  $M_{age} = 49.1$ ,  $SD = 13.06$ ) participated in this study. Participants had worked an average of 7.4 years in the settlement area, in which half of the participants who had worked less than five years and the rest of the participants who worked more than 10 years in the field. The majority of the participants identified as Middle Eastern and all, but one participant spoke Arabic in addition to another language. One participant had a PhD, six participants had a bachelor's degree, three participants had a college diploma. Participants served an average of 310 Syrian refugees,

with three individuals who had served over 1000 Syrian refugees in their resettlement. Eight participants reported that they have immigrated to Canada.

### **Procedure**

Participants were asked to partake in one interview session lasting approximately 60 minutes. Before starting the session, the interviewer and the participant discussed the letter of information and consent process. There was one semi-structured interview session which included the completion of the demographics survey and questions about the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees (FSRs) and their perceptions of cultural enculturation within these women as a result of emigrating from a war-torn country. Participants were asked follow-up questions to probe for in-depth and comprehensive responses. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. For participants who did not wish to be audio-recorded, the researcher took detailed written notes during the interview, which were destroyed after they were transcribed and scanned onto an encrypted hard drive. Participants were asked to refrain from describing identifiable details when relaying somebody else's story. The participants were thanked and compensated for their participation and were told that they will be informed of results at the conclusion of the project via a publication paper. They were invited to contact the researcher, if needed.

### **Instrumentation**

**Consent Documentation.** A letter of information and consent (see Appendix B) was provided to all participants to inform them about the nature of the study, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, data storage and compensation. The informed consent form contained two checkboxes for optional participation in audio-recording of the interview, as well as the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study to be used in the

dissemination of the research. All participants provided consent for the use of unidentifiable quotes in the publication and two participants declined consent for audio-recording.

**Demographics Survey.** Basic demographic information about participants was collected such as gender, age, racial identity, language(s) spoken, educational background, estimated number of refugees they worked with. The demographics survey can be viewed in Appendix D.

**Interview Guide.** The semi-structured interview was separated into three categories, with the first set of questions pertaining to perceptions of Syrian refugee migrants, such as “Do you perceive any common issues among Syrian refugees (war-torn countries) compared to immigrant newcomers?”. The next set of questions focused on generating responses about female Syrian refugees, such as “What are some losses’ female Syrian refugees experience as a result of migration?”. Further prompting questions were included to elicit detailed information, such as, “How do these affect the settlement process?”. The last set of questions were directed towards the settlement needs and challenges of female Syrian refugees, such as “What barriers exist for a Syrian refugee woman integrating into the Canadian society?”. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to provide a definition for “identity” to get an understanding of their perceptions of successful integration. The interview guide can be viewed in Appendix E.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed Creswell’s (2003) procedure for qualitative data analysis. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, with identifying details blinded; for example, if a participant mentioned a name of an individual they worked with, the transcript would read “[client’s name]”. First, the transcripts were reviewed to gather a general

impression of their content and meaning. Second, specific utterances were segmented into meaning units concerning female Syrian refugees' pre-migration and post-migration experiences, highlighting the barriers, challenges and strengths. Each meaning unit was given a descriptive label (codes) which captured the sentiment of the statement. The codes were then categorized into themes and described, utilizing meaning units (verbatim responses) to highlight important details. Lastly, the thematic content analysis was interpreted to comment on the cultural integration experience of female Syrian refugees.

## Chapter 4 - Results

This study provides a perspective on the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees (FSRs) as perceived by settlement workers who are their primary contact at arrival. Ten settlement workers from a community-based settlement agency completed a semi-structured interview about their perceptions of settlement among female Syrian refugees. A qualitative content analysis procedure was employed.

### **Pre-Migration Experiences: Ethnic Identity and the Syrian Conflict**

This theme describes the factors that contribute to their pre-existing ethnic identity and their encounters with the conflict in Syria. This theme contains seven codes: *social norms, gender roles, geographic region, access to education, health beliefs, mental health stigma, and witnessing violence*. There was a variation of responses within these codes. Participants discussed the ideological framework that guides the behaviour and role of females in the Syrian society. The data presented in this theme provides clarification for the discord that FSRs experience (see theme 2) in relation to their ethnic identity when they migrate.

Participants commented on the social norms that guide and direct behaviour and maintain order in the Syrian society. They suggested that the connotation of time is spiritually-embedded.

*P4 – “Time is very flexible in the culture. They usually say a phrase “Insha’Allah” when they see one another, which means God willing. They are religious and spiritual individuals, who believe that if God wants me to be there, I will be there.”*

Likewise, participants indicated that religious and spiritual beliefs guide the gendered expectations of individuals in the society. The ideological norms are focused to foster a cohesive family unit rather than rewarding personal autonomy.



*P7 – “It’s stemmed from the background they came from, in the part of the world, where the man is the God of the house, literally they call him the “God” of the house, “Rabbul albayt” whereas the woman is the goddess of the house, she takes care of the house.”*

*P6 – “Family and children are happiness. They tend to have big families and barely have time for themselves. Not taking time for themselves as much, some of them do.*

They specified that in Syria, males and females are considered to be unequal binary pairs of which, males are dominant, and females are subordinate. Participants mentioned that the patriarchal values contribute to the hierarchy of authority exhibited within the society.

*P8 – “So, I can definitely see that the family is patriarchal. I see the males as the lead, so the men first then the youth, the male youth. They are in charge of the family in general, big time authority which renders women technically the lower class in the family.”*

As a result, the conventional gender roles are overarching within the Syrian society. Participants expressed that females are socialized and expected to prioritize family over employment and education.

*P8 – “The way the culture is, because of the patriarchal form of the culture, the men’s’ needs are to be working, providing, getting a wife and fulfilling the role as the support, as the male of the house. While the women’s’ needs are basically, finding that guy who will support me to fulfil my domestic role”*

*P2 – “They can’t go to work, they have to take care of the family, it’s always the family that is the priority. Even if she’s educated and good at work, but family comes first.”*

Participants reported that females will pursue work in two cases: (i) to support the family, during conflict or when her spouse is not working or, (ii) if she has been socialized by her family to build a career.

*P2 – “The men are responsible for the financial issue, but many times the women are helping with that, especially when there is a war”*

*P5 – “In Syria, if her husband is not working, they are expected to take steps to find a job to support the family financially. They are responsible for the house, children and the husband”*

*P9 – “The expectations of Syrian women are no different from any other women, back home I think it depends on the family dynamics and structure. So, for anyone who is born in Canada compared to someone in Syria, they could have similar expectations depending on how they were raised or what they know to be familiar to them”*

Participants commented on the impact of geographic region to educational outcomes of the residents. The participants viewed individuals from rural areas to be disadvantaged to obtain appropriate education.

*P3 – “Syrian women who came here, especially the ones that came to London are not highly educated, they came from rural areas. We have seen lot of them come from farming communities, even some of them are not educated in their own language”*

*P4 – “Individuals from cities have higher education and were working in higher levels. “*

Specifically, participants discussed the level of English that is taught to individuals. They described that the language of instruction in school is Arabic and that English words are taught in higher grades.

*P10 – “But in their country they don’t learn it when they are in kindergarten, they learn it when they are in higher grades, they learn just words, so they end up not knowing a sentence.”*

Participants identified that the extent of education that children are afforded is low in Syria. They reported that males who have access to education tend to end their education early due to family or financial demands and get involved in agriculture.

*P10 – “Most of them just leave and learn a skill from an uncle or father, from someone and they continue with that skill. They make the money, bring the food home, and women take care of children”*

*P4 – “Men usually start working from a young age, usually stop school at grade 2 and start to help out at the farm. Everyone contributes to the family in their own way”*

*P5 – “They were mainly farmers who rely on themselves.”*

Additionally, participants reported that the health care system in Syria is based on self-referral, even when seeking specialized services. However, the common practice for Syrian women is to follow traditional healing and medical practices.

*P10 – “You just go directly to the specialist, or sometimes you just boil some herbs and put something on your tummy that will make you feel better. They don’t go right away to the doctor, they are used to boiling some herbs, doing something for the child if he has fever, and if it’s really severe, then they will go to the doctor”*

Participants mentioned that health care in Syria is not easily accessible due to financial barriers, which can be a possible reason for less help-seeking behaviour from health care providers.

*P9 – “Having access to doctors and medication is also what being healthy is all about. Again, that is according to one’s financial situation, because not everyone can access that assistance.”*

In contrast, participants noted that it is common practice for females to support one another during pregnancy by helping with their domestic duties.

*P10 – “They’re very helpful to each other, if someone delivered a baby, they will go and help take care of their children, they’ll go and cook for a little while to help her.”*

To add to that, participants reported there is a lack of knowledge and resources related to mental health.

*P5 – “Health means to get regular check-ups. Mental health – they don’t like to acknowledge it because they don’t understand it”*

*P2 – “They don’t have PSWs or mental health care”*

They mentioned that mental health is attributed to personal inadequacies and is minimized and silenced within the society.

*P10 – “It’s hard to explain, because mental health, in Arabic language, something wrong with your head, something not right. Not like here, mental health, which anybody can have”*

*P2 – “If we are talking about Syrian or middle eastern, mental health is a very sensitive issue back there. Many times, we feel they need some mental health help, but its shame if they ask about it”*

*P3 – “Because it is taboo, the expression is not direct, they don’t have this. They won’t say they have a mental illness, they will say they are experiencing difficulty”*

Participants mentioned that mental health related issues do arise, but these individuals tend to resolve these issues within the family, in order to maintain privacy and honour. Since mental health is not well understood, individuals utilize spiritual and religious practices to seek help.

*P3 – “If there is an issue/conflict in the family, such as domestic violence, then you won’t find any women’s community house like you have here or any agencies. That’s a family issue and dealt with by the elders in the family.”*

*P3 – “They will talk if someone has an ulcer or disease, cancer, but they will not speak up about mental health. They will talk in their own ways, using their traditional ways of fasting or praying or asking for blessings. They feel they can overcome. Or at times, they will do it within their closed circles, by talking to elderly.”*

In regard to the Syrian conflict, participants reported there are individual differences in the extent of violence witnessed by FSRs. These experiences include from the time they fled their country and their experience in refugee camps.

*P3 – “Not all refugees have the same experience. Some of them left the country before the problem happened in 2011, so they stayed in neighbouring countries “*

*P3 – “So, the experiences the refugees are having is different, how long they have been through the war. Those who were there before or in the beginning of the war fled, but those who stayed there, they are seeing the atrocities and were able to escape at the end has a big impact on their life.”*

*P4 – “On the way of fleeing, people were murdered, no food, hydro, water and living in refugee camps.”*

Participants mentioned that most refugees have witnessed violence in the forms of losing family members and losing their homes. They mentioned these experiences elicited negative reactions and fear responses which contribute to their mental health functioning.

*P1 – “All the clients I have, the kids have seen blood. They’ve seen people get killed, bombing and everything. So mentally, it’s a huge, huge, huge difference.”*

*P10 – “I think most of them have witnessed, family members being killed, bombs, the destruction of their houses, even their own kids, I have a couple of clients who have lost their own children, experience wounds not only physical but of course emotional and physical, psychological.”*

*P9 – “The most traumatic thing would be the witnessing of death or bombing if they have been through the war, sickness has been around. The feeling of helplessness and hopelessness. Their inability to protect and comfort their family from danger.”*

Taken together, the responses in this theme portray the complexities of the interdependent culture that form the pre-existing ethnic identity of Syrian women before their arrival to Canada. The level of violence that was witnessed by FSRs before migrating justifies their physical and mental health functioning upon arrival.

### **Settlement Needs & Challenges**

This theme describes the settlement needs and challenges of FSRs as they settle into Canada. There was a variation of responses that commented on both the intrapersonal changes and changes in interpersonal interactions. Eleven codes emerged from the data: *acculturative stress, refugee status, language difficulties, parenting: power struggle, gender oppression, marital conflict, involuntary migration, loss of home, family loss, post-traumatic stress, and health care needs.*

Participants commented on the stress of navigating a new society which is systematically different than what they are accustomed to.

*P2 – “We don't have snow back home, what should I do? What they are doing, shoveling? What's that, I need to buy that.' They are happy to be here, safe, good country, nice people, but small things on daily basis stress you out.”*

*P10 – “They don't know how to live here it's hard, they are used to something different, so ok this is the appointment, ok, they have to go here on time, this is where you go. If I go to one of our hospitals, I get lost so what if they have never been to a huge hospital like here. So, Zone B, level 5, this is the room, name of the doctor which they don't know how to spell, call if you miss the appointment, just the way of life is complicated and is not easy”*

Participants expressed that the refugee status (government-assisted refugees and privately-sponsored refugees) of the individuals impacts their needs and challenges.

*P5 – “There are many more GARs and we can direct them properly because they come here on the first day they land and are provided support in all areas.”*

*P4 – “The Syrians also do a lot of moving, from temporary housing units, based on government funding. These are usually large families, and there are housing laws that need to be abided to and adequate housing is not affordable for family sizes.”*

*P3 – “They are dealing with PSRs for a short period of time so that they can enter into the labour market. Research shows that the percentage of people employable is higher in PSRs than GARs.”*

*P3 – “After one year, the difference is that the GARs are more aware of the resources and PSRs say “are you going to abandon us, who will help us now?”*

Participants mentioned that a major source of acculturative stress is obtaining employment for adults and adjusting to school for children. Their educational background and their English fluency are critical to their success in each domain.

*P4 – “They realize that there are education limitations and that their credentials may not be recognized in Canada”*

*P4 – “ELD, English language development, so these are kids who came from refugee camps. They've had gaps in their education, some of them are in high school based on their age because that's the system here but the last time they were in school was in grade 3 or 4. They have 4/5 years gap in education, so they are not even literate in their own culture, own language, so it makes it harder for them to grasp the new language, when they are illiterate in their own language”*

Consequently, FSRs enter the workplace in order to support their families while their spouses learn English/French or tries to complete equivalency requirements to secure employment. Nonetheless, FSRs are still expected to fulfil their domestic duties.

*P5 – “Women are more flexible with jobs. Both men and women try to work towards the family but have separate roles. These roles change when they move here. Women are willing to take up a job to support the husband to do ESL classes.”*

*P2 – “Women, they are working all the time, because they are now more independent, they need to go to work, so, they are responsible for the family, and the extended family and the homework and the kids and preparing lunch, cleaning the house. So, it’s more work now than before.”*

*P10 – “Most of them have five plus children, so try coming to school and having the kids, one of them is sick, one of them have the dentist, one of them the school called he is late, he missed his lunch, he left his lunch at home. They are always busy, very busy”*

Participants mentioned that their understanding of English impacts their participation in settlement programs which are mainly offered in English. This in turn, delays their ability to seek government benefits, obtain employment and their self-esteem.

*P3 – “It’s not easy for the women to integrate in the society because of the language.”*

*P6 – “I think the language, because a lot of programs are in English. They are new so they need to learn more about the system here. The information goes out to everybody but if they don’t know English, it’s a challenge for them. Some people are eager to follow, but the language is a barrier. They feel pressure and they don’t feel comfortable writing the names. For them it is a struggle to write and read”*

*P5 – “Mostly, the language is an issue with all Syrians, and so they have a hard time applying for benefits from the government”*

*P1 – “Some of them were ready to learn and work, the only problem they were having the issue with, is the language. Some of them would love to go to work but it’s all the language. “*

Participants reported that parenting is a significant source of distress for individuals due to the communication difficulties. When families move to Canada, the children are able

to learn English faster than their parents and hence take the role of translators for the parents who are still learning English.

*P4 – “When children learn English faster than their parents because they are in the school system, they end up interpreting letter that come in the mail or when they are at the doctor’s clinic. This creates a change in the power and control between the parents and children”*

*P7 – “So the kids, they move, their level of language moves, moves, moves, moves, until the language gap is widening between them. Then the dangerous thing, the kids start looking at their parents down. Because when they receive a letter from the government, they don’t know what’s written, so “hey son/daughter, come and read this for me”, the son/daughter will feel superior to his or her own parents, and start reading letter for them. Then, confidence of the parents in themselves will weaken, and the kids can do whatever they want”*

In hand with the increased power within the children, participants reported that there are cases where children exploit this advantage to fulfil their desires such as asking for more money or re-negotiating their curfew times.

*P2 – “You get the kids telling their parents sometimes, especially the mom because they are with them all the time, “oh you cannot tell me this, you cannot do that, you have to give me the money that the government give to you, so they are afraid they are not doing that, if they don’t do that, the kids will tell the school, that the parents are not taking care of us, and they are afraid the government will take their kids from them, so they are losing their parenting”*

Participants mentioned that couples argue about parenting strategies for their children, during which most parents struggle to exude the same control on their kids as they did in Syria.

*P2 – “The husband and wife always have an issue to communicate with each other, how to deal with the kids here in Canada. He is saying something, she is saying something else, they are coming to us, complaining, blaming each other.”*

In contrast to the gender roles that females followed in the Syrian society, participants reported that FSRs have difficulty negotiating their new gender roles.



*P1 – “They came from village, so it’s very different for them to get up because husband did everything, he brings the money home and they take care of kids, cooking and cleaning.”*

*P8 – “They are brought up with certain expectations, they have opportunity to experience more freedom and be more powerful, at the same time, being from a culture with a certain expectation for women’s role, it conflicts what they are experiencing or what they can have as an individual”*

*P3 – “Those who are married, their husbands are not who they were. They see a person who doesn’t speak the language in this country. He is no longer the person who used to come and feel comfortable, now he goes to school with her, they are at the same level”*

When participants were asked about changes in the interpersonal interactions between family members as a result of settlement, participants reported FSRs are subjugated to covert and overt oppressive behaviour from their spouse.

*P1 – “Most contact info is for the husband. I give you an example, I don’t know his wife’s contact information. She’s like he doesn’t want me to go and visit my family. He wants me to be like a slave, sitting at home, cooking and cleaning. I saw him saying ‘She can’t do it and she doesn’t get it’, it is a way of bullying her. I say, ‘you can’t do that, you can’t talk to your wife or child, like that’”*

Another covert way of oppression towards females is when parents encourage patriarchal social norms to their children.

*P8 – “I’ve seen with most of the girls who are in school, they are trying to get their education, I see parents encourage them, however, the expectation for most of the girls is to be present at home and support at home”*

Participants noted that they perceive changes in interpersonal interactions within their family as a result of FSRs adopting an independent lifestyle.

*P1- “The woman wants to stand up and say OK, I’m not that woman who I used to be before. She told me in front of him that he wants me to be home 24/7, but no I’m not going to do it. Some of the men don’t get it, no, they are not happy with that.”*

*P6 – “It’s a challenge for them to see their women more independent, it’s different from Syria. The ladies are very happy with their role.”*

Participants reported that males feel powerless when their role is no longer unique to them and is being fulfilled by their spouse.

*P1- “Because all the money go to children, women and youth and all the men left behind. There’s nothing. That’s a huge problem, because they used to have power before, but it’s gone. From the children they learn, the wife is learning, so he has absolutely no power anymore.”*

*P5 – “Men sometimes say that their wives are divorcing them, and we can’t control them like in the past. Men feel that their wives are not the same because she controls the financials and receives the child benefit in her name.”*

*P7- “Well he’s not working, and the child tax benefit goes to the wife, so the feeling of inferiority that he is doing nothing, sometimes hurts”*

In many cases, one participant mentioned that FSRs are willing to learn but are conflicted to pursue learning in fear of becoming victims of domestic violence.

*P5 – “Case workers encourage all to be independent over time and persistence to help feel confident. Women want help but they don’t want their husbands to know because some may become victims of abuse.”*

Participants reported that the difference in the Canadian society is that the legal system enforces equal human rights which empower women to leave unhealthy marriages. In addition, the social norms do not condemn women for seeking divorce.

*P7 – “Here, if you just touch her like this and there is a mark here, it’s a big issue. Whereas back home, she would not dare go outside and tell anybody what her husband did to her. Even if she goes to the police and complain about her husband, they will not do anything.”*

*P5 – “Many couples get divorced when they got here, sometimes due to domestic violence. In Syria, divorce is not easy because family and society starts to treat you differently and you can’t meet your friends like before. Here they are already alone and separated from their families and financial help. She looks for the benefits for the kids and if the environment is not good with her husband, she would rather leave the marriage.”*

Participants noted that a key difference between refugees and immigrants is their incentives to re-locate. The sentiment among refugees is to flee their country to seek safety.

Participants noted that refugees arrive feeling immense feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness.

*P3 – “People fleeing war, they don’t know who is going to take them, they have no choice.”*

They reported that their traumatic experiences before migrating in hand with the acculturative stress they experience in Canada trigger unsettling and disorderly feelings.

*P7 – “Some of the Syrians, by the way, if anything goes back the way it used to be, they are ready to go back. I have a client, who say this is our country, but some of them say, no, as soon as things have changed back home, they are ready to go back home. They don’t change.”*

Participants noted that involuntary migration is likely to surface a strong sense of displacement and loss of familiarity.

*P9 – “I would say number one is the loss of home, and that can be in a lot of things, like their actual physical home, their country, their stores, the familiar area that they were brought up in.”*

*P9 – “That can go along with your country falling apart and not being able to do anything about it, that can lead to PTSD.”*

*P10- “They miss their family and they feel they lost them. Because they live close to each other, like their mom would be on the same street, same village, same city so they cannot see their aunts and uncles anymore”*

The loss of home is exaggerated for FSRs who have also experienced loss of their spouse and/or children to war.

*P2 – “Some have lost their husbands, they were pregnant during the war and they lost their husbands. They’ve lost children.”*

*P5 – “These individuals have moved to another country and are essentially homeless. They are not getting enough help. For many, their husbands have passed away.”*

Participants noted that their sense of belonging was not only represented by their country but also the family connections and support systems they had.

*P4 – “Separation from family members is a major loss, because they are accustomed to large support systems back home which has been taken away”*

During times of conflict, social support is a protective factor from experiencing trauma. In the case of Syrian refugees, participants noted that they are separated from their extended families who are a source of resilience. Instead, there are feelings of helplessness because even though they have fled the war, they are worried for their families back home.

*P1 – “The big problem I am having is when they go to sleep and put their head on the pillow, that is all the what happened in the past, family member okay, its Ramadan, I am eating, enjoying, there they don’t have money, food to eat. This kind of thing bother them a lot.”*

Participants noted that families have yet to recuperate from the traumatic experiences they witnessed in Syria. In the beginning, most families are adjusting to feeling safe.

*P4 – “They are still getting used to being safe here, so they are a lot more vigilant of their surroundings.”*

Parents receive calls from the school if their children are still coping with traumatic memories and nightmares, which increases the parental stress.

*P1 – “Parents received phone call from school saying, “Your child is not ready, so come and take your child”, crying, shouting, because it’s a big difference from war country to safe country, and different system”*

*P8 – “Lots of issues regarding self-esteem, socialization, gender roles, social/emotional parts, it can be very emotional. I also have kids who cut, so it can be very difficult”*

Conversely, participants mentioned that at the time of arrival, some individuals are in a state of shock and gradually begin to exhibit characteristics of post-traumatic stress.

*P8 – “I’ve seen kids who came in resilient, strong, but I’ve seen them collapse after a year of their settlement, where they reach a state of depression. Which was very interesting, because the same kids I worked a year before were strong and able to express things, out of nowhere they just shut down and depression”*

*P9 – “I’m also seeing the opposite as well, that came happy and with time, becoming upset, just because of the trauma and just reflecting through of the example of the client I gave with the PPD, just having so many kids and wanting to help her kids but not being able to take care of herself first”*

Participants noted that this is especially common among youth due to the developmental stage they are at. Participants discussed the limited knowledge of mental health and their likeliness of attributing difficulties to their personality.

*P8 – “So they will vocalize that they are an angry person. Especially when we have an altercation, they say I can’t control myself, I’m so angry, this is who I am, I can’t handle it, I can’t control it. They express it.”*

*P8 – “They see it as their personality, as this is who they are. I’m just an angry person, I can deal with it in different ways”*

Due to the health care system and the violence they experienced in Syria, participants noted that the physical health of FSRs declines when they arrive.

*P4 – “PTSD, ex. A woman had witnessed her husband’s death, house bombed, lost her kids. A lot more health problems and disabilities. I’ve seen many learning disabilities, cerebral palsy, and other physical disabilities. Dental work is required more than any other families who immigrate here, cost is high for PSRs, there are some Arabic speaking dentists. Women need more health resources especially if they are having a new baby”*

Taken together, the responses in this theme portray the challenges that FSRs must navigate, precisely because they are displaced into a society that is ideologically and practically contrasting to Syria.

### **Settlement Services Support**

This theme discusses how settlement services augment integration into the society based on the challenges and needs that participants identified in the last theme. This theme comments on the role and helpfulness of settlement services and so seven codes about settlement education emerged: *cultural knowledge, importance of learning English, school system, community service, parenting skills, social media & technology and mental health*

*education. Four additional codes emerged from the data that explain the barriers to accessing these services: accessibility as a barrier, systemic barriers to service provision, mental health as a barrier to seeking help and dependence on services as a means of hindrance.*

Participants noted that females comprise the majority of people that they serve. Participants mentioned that their role is to delegate information about Canadian cultural norms such as the role of the legal system, social etiquette and the importance of honesty.

*P8 – “My job is to highlight the society they live in, so they understand there is something different out there, they are free to make changes.”*

*P3 – “Like knowing that you shouldn’t be scared if you see the police here, they are a source of help. How to build a relationship between landlord and housing.”*

*P5 – “Turn-taking during conversations versus cutting one another off. Understanding the nuances of conversations.”*

*P10 – “You put the gas here, you pay, no one sees you, but no one takes it, it’s different, in their country, you have to pay for gas before you fill it.”*

However, participants noted that FSRs are encouraged to preserve their cultural heritage in accordance to the Canadian value of cultural diversity. They are educated about the importance of integration versus assimilation.

*P3 – “You are Canadian if you protect your culture, if you try to assimilate in the Canadian culture, there will be a shock that you cannot ever be a Canadian. But holding on to their culture makes them stronger”*

*P8 - Being a part of the community so that they are not isolated and living in pockets of the bigger community. You want them to keep their own identity but at the same time, be engaged and understand their rights and participate, become active participants of the community.*

Participants noted that a main area of settlement education is relaying the importance of learning English and participating in language learning programs in order to become active members of the society. Participants reported that learning the language allows individuals to maintain power and control with their children.

*P6 – “If they want to respect the community, they will learn the language and they will feel more confident. This will help the children too. If they don’t understand the culture and language, it will be hard to help their children when they get stuck.”*

*P7 – “We are only at the stage of concentrating and encouraging them to learn the language, so they can help the children in the schools and show them that they are not less educated than what they are”*

Participants reported that the school is an essential point of contact for families. So, settlement workers in schools help resolve conflicts between the school and parents such as ensuring immunization and providing education about aggressive behaviour.

*P9 – “The way that kids were raised in Syria, to them I learned that hands on is normal, it shows they are defending themselves, whereas hands on here is totally out of the question.”*

*P3 – “If they want immunization for their kids, they are explained what it is, what the LHSC does, why it can be important and where to get the from and what to do if you child is told to go home if they did not get immunized. They are told not to panic, etc.”*

More recently, participants reported that parents, especially FSRs present concerns about their children participating in sex education. This conflicts with their previously held value of modesty. Participants noted that they may educate parents against the information they hear from others.

*P2 – “Sex ed, health classes, the school sends permission, and the parents always reject that. So, they think, the schools will let the kids watch bad movies”*

*P4 – “Mothers are afraid of the sex education curriculum in schools, especially for their daughters”*

*P4 – “Some women will come to me to speak about the sex ed curriculum because the teacher is a male and they are uncomfortable to speak to them about this”*

Participants outlined that they encourage FSRs to volunteer in schools to become acquainted with the system and to understand the acculturative context of their children.

*P6 – “They will feel more at home, like the belong to Canada. They will be able to understand each other, in the family. For example, if the mom learn/volunteer in the*

*school, they can see how children are educated. Otherwise, when the child turns 11/12, there are conflicts between the child and parents because of different views”*

Participants indicated that community service allows individuals to feel rewarded, to develop social connections and to gather experience for potential employment.

*P6 – “I think helping each other even though we are different. We are unique but knowing that we can work together. Economically, individuals are encouraged to help each other”*

*P7 – “They say, ‘how come you want me to work for free?’ Volunteering is by itself a culture, you have to build the culture first. If you want as a newcomer to be connected, volunteering is one of them.”*

*P6 – “Volunteering is another value they can learn. I encourage my participants to volunteer, I think that’s Canadian. I have a client who is 19, who is studying and is looking for a job, I told her we can tell her about the process.”*

Participants reported that FSRs require information about safe discipline procedures with children. They are explained the importance of parenting and using positive discipline approaches to avoid getting penalized by the law.

*P3 – “In their country, parenting doesn’t exist, but here if you don’t do it properly, there can be conflicts with CAS and justice system”*

*P6 – “We talk about how to raise resilient kids, behavioural issues, how to resolve conflict. There is a difference in conflict resolution, they are told “no spanking”, dealing with tantrums”*

*P10 – “Back home, if you are spanking your son, no one will tell you anything. Here its different, the police will come and ask you several questions.”*

Participants mentioned that social media has been beneficial for families to stay connected during the conflict pre-migration and still today. Participants noted that FSRs are inclined to maintain connections through social media platforms. However, there are drawbacks to this that affect the mental health of these individuals.

*P3 – “One thing that has been really helpful is social media. Like any other person, they use WhatsApp, even in refugee camps they had no TV, so they stayed up to date*



*through WhatsApp. We noticed that some individuals already have information before we contacted them because our clients are willing to share this with others.”*

*P1- “So, bombing, killing, this kind of thing is going on, on a daily basis, so it’s hard for us because they’re brain is always on the news, what’s happening there, what’s going on? Even though I tell them, just once a week, watch the news, don’t watch is over and over. No no, family is there, we have to. So, it’s hard to say no.”*

Participants noted that they inform FSRs about effectively vetting information and leveraging their proficiency into motivating them to learning computer skills.

*P3 – “Social media can be unreliable, women who are not educated are more likely to believe what they see so we are trying to educate them on computers.”*

*P7 – “When newcomers come here, they listen to many people and don’t know who is correct. This session we tell them what the reliable sources of information.”*

Participants reported that FSRs’ understanding of mental health impacts their perceptions and help-seeking behaviour for it.

*P9 – “There are resources available, but it’s about how to get these families to go because they have fear of, what if word gets out in the community, my family is going to be looked at differently, ‘no, no, no, we’re going to avoid that’”*

*P9 – “They will take it offensively and say that ‘you are assuming there is something wrong with me and how dare you’”*

Participants noted that the topic is sensitive and there is little to no knowledge about it among the population they serve. They noted the importance of having a strong relationship with families and having a culturally-appropriate discourse.

*P9 – “We are seeing a lot of mental health needs, but you have to be sensitive in your approach. There’s no word in Arabic that can define mental health. You don’t necessarily have to use the word ‘mental health’ with them but you know it is and you offer them that guidance and a lot of take it and say “thank you, yes, that is exactly what I’ve been looking for”*

*P10 – “But mental health, explaining it to a newcomer is very hard. No matter how many workshops we go to and explanation, it’s still hard”*

Participants noted that although there are plenty of services available for FSRs, there are just as many barriers in accessing these services, specifically when learning a new language. These barriers can be physical barriers, language and cultural barriers, mental health concerns, systemic factors, etc.

*P9 – “The way they get to these resources or services, the travelling, the accommodation, those things can play a huge role in affecting their ability to access”*

*P1 – “The language, she says her brain can’t take it because I came from a village, here it is different, you have to educate yourself and learn the language”*

*P9 – “And if you have a spouse, it also depends on whether they encourage you to do that or are they going to be the person to tell you nope, this is what you can and cannot do.”*

*P6 – “The family structure, if the husband is working, the woman is tired from taking care of everything, going to school and going to programs. We have information sessions. I like to give them things in English, but they have trauma, or they are tired, they learn in their own language. It’s going to take some time. Some are not because of the trauma or the age, it is a barrier to go and learn in a school. They get tired but also, they are not kids anymore so sitting for 2-3 hours, they have other responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning.”*

As noted earlier, FSRs are primarily responsible for looking after their children and so if there are conflicts at school related to their children’s behaviour, they have a disadvantage from attending programs at the settlement agency.

*P9 – “If their child has an after-school program and a woman’s program runs at the same time, so they put the needs of their kids first and that can be challenging because they don’t attend programs that they can benefit from”*

*P9 – “When you continuously address their issue of their kid’s behavior, you see that families are starting to leave, like parents leaving classes and that’s disturbing their progress or attendance, so a lot of things get delayed”*

When participants were asked about the readiness of FSRs to seek mental health resources, they stated that previous cultural norms hinder their disclosure.

*P5 – “Women feel it’s not good to disclose their problems. Mental health is like something is wrong with them. A small number of women are courageous and will seek out help if there are major problems however, they need to be educated to be more open.”*

*P9 – “Others, keen and are happy, next thing you know, they are having child number 5 or 6, and all of a sudden having breakdown. Post-partum depression, they’re opening up just because they know there is someone in this situation, female to female, they don’t feel comfortable exposing what they’ve been through to just anyone.”*

In some cases, participants mentioned that FSRs expressed feeling stigmatized and fearing judgment from the Syrian community they are a part of.

*P2 – “Many of them, they are telling, we really want to do that, but other people from the same community will talk how bad we are.”*

Participants indicated that there are scarce services for FSRs in the community, especially related to mental health. Systemic factors such as funding, waitlists, or qualified bilingual professionals delay the psychological recovery of FSRs.

*P6 – “There are not many psychologists that speak Arabic”*

*P4 - “When they arrived there were long wait lists and providers were not prepared for incoming trauma because it happened so fast. Systemic issues are still present in politics, but I encourage them to vote. They play a large role in the funding for programs”*

The amalgamation of challenges they face, information they receive and the barriers they navigate to access services, participants noted that most FSRs withdraw from learning and become dependent on settlement agencies to direct them.

*P1 – “What happened is that with the child tax benefit, within 6 months they get the money. In the beginning they had very rough time, and then money was coming, child tax benefit was coming, trillium was coming, GST was coming, and government sponsor money was coming. Money, money, money”*

*P8 – “So, they stay in their home after school speaking Arabic, doing minimal work as well, that is the majority”*

*P1 – “Sometimes when the mail comes, they bring it to us to translate to see what’s on the mail because they don’t know, they don’t want to read”*

Taken together, these responses reflect the influence of settlement services in addressing the needs of Syrian newcomers and the ongoing challenges and barriers the FSRs experience as part of the settlement process. It is evident that individuals experience varying levels of discord in their Syrian ethnic identity, and settlement services help to bridge the gap between their pre-existing attitudes with the new culture.

### **Personal Strengths & Resilience**

This theme comprises of participant’s observations about the personal resources and strengths that FSRs utilize to cope with the acculturative stress of re-settlement. This theme contains eight codes: *positive attitude, eagerness to learn, acknowledging the value of education, eagerness to work, assertiveness, active help-seeking behaviours, social connectedness, and culture preservation*. These data indicate that while FSRs have endured oppression, trauma and acculturative stress, their tenacity and vigour allow them to construct their unique bicultural identity. Not only do these characteristics motivate FSRs to integrate successfully in society, but they allow community members to witness human strength and resilience.

Participants noted that FSRs are hopeful and determined to settle in the society. These attitudes encourage and motivate their spouse and children to learn and adopt new cultural values.

*P2 – “They have a strong personality, I’m talking about Syrian women and they have good social skills. Men they are more like they want to stay in the same routine. Women have hopes. Men are happy with good food, good shelter, good kids.”*

*P3 – “They are flexible in trying to understand, more than the males, when it comes to taking care of the family and they push the males, “go and do something, work, don’t just sit down”*

*P9 – “When kids are learning from their parents, they see that they are motivated, they are out to learn.”*

Instead of fearing the loss of their culture, participants noted that females are open to new experiences and learning about the Canadian culture.

*P3 – “A large Canada Day celebration, they were engaged, they want to know how celebrations happen and, in the classrooms, they recite ‘O’Canada’”*

*P4 – “Some individuals are curious on what they can take on from Canadian culture. Some will ask me, “please tell me a place where only English is spoken”*

Participants expressed that FSRs are not only attentive and engaged during information sessions, but they are practicing their new roles as equals to males.

*P5 – “They are open-minded and ready to learn. The government has prepared them to some extent. They are attentive during information session about school, health, public and ask lots of questions”*

*P1 – “You have to, she wants to learn, she wants to learn at the same time. Some of them start driving. They went to school, some of them don’t want to pay \$500 for the training so they go by hours instructor. I have 4-5 who never seen a [steering] wheel, and now they’re driving.”*

Participants mentioned that some FSRs are ready and willing to take up employment whether they have an educational background or not.

*P2 – “When there is a war, many of families or women they lost their husbands or father or brothers, so they have to work to provide the basic needs for their families, beside taking care of the family”*

*P3 – “Some of them, even if they have a lot of barriers to have their education recognized, language problem, they say we don’t want any assistance from the government, just give us work”*

Participants reported that due to the settlement challenges that FSRs have faced, they are starting to acknowledge the value of education and boost their children to pursue high education. They set an example for their children by being active in applying their knowledge.

*P10 – “Their mentality has changed, education is important, some of them tell me even if I don’t take the citizenship, I’m learning how to deal with, I go to the supermarket and I’m learning what’s a tomato, what’s lettuce”*

Participants reported that FSRs hold their children’s success at utmost importance and that when they see their children’s achievements they are renewed with strength and hope.

*P3 – “And they are more flexible in seeking help for their children, they want to make sure their kids are in school, so they follow up with their kids, they were in refugee camps where they were outside all day, and now they are like protectors of the family”*

*P3 – “Their motive is to help their kids succeed, it is because of them that they are here. The men do that as well, but I see the women see the value of education for the future of their children. Their success makes them feel better and helps to improve their mental health”*

*P10 – “They’re happy that their kids are learning the language because your child is a mirror of you, you want your child always to be better than you”*

Participants noted that FSRs are willing to expand their roles because the Canadian society provides them with opportunities to exercise their freedom.

*P1 – “The woman has no voice to talk, but when they come to this country, they know they have the voice”*

*P9 – “They may have not done any of this in Syria, and then they are coming here and doing all of that. That shows how strong they are, how willing they are to take on new things to shape up their personality”*

*P8 – “For me I see that women now feel that they have more strength and opportunity for more freedom, they can feel it, this is where their strength is coming from, being able to stand up for themselves.”*

Participants noted that FSRs see value in adopting independence and using the services available to them.

*P2 – “They are stronger, more independent, they have the feeling that somebody will help us if we are in crisis, we don’t need to sit and be silent”*

*P4 – “Syrian women are not shy like other cultures where people think they are bothering or ignore their issues. They are willing to use the services.”*

Participants indicated that FSRs connect with and support other females from the same community to encourage them to adopt values of independence.

*P8 – “But just for newcomer Syrians, it’s just a different dynamic of the group, the solidarity among the group, the way they support each other.”*

*P6 – “I think they are brave women, family-oriented, resilient because of everything they have been through. Socially reserved, but they are friendly, they open up more to their own population. They are very friendly. They like to share, they like to learn about other people.”*

One participant mentioned that their social connections is a means to retain their cultural values.

*P4 – “They preserve their culture very well because they are well connected with each other. Many have come together and spent months together in hotels.”*

Although the Canadian society provides opportunities for growth for FSRs, they are aware and ensure that they preserve their cultural heritage.

*P5 – “They preserve their culture to a high extent through their cooking, taking care of the kids, being dressed in a hijab, and following religion.”*

*P3 – “They are smart people and they see value in keeping their culture and they know that through the settlement workers and programs they attend, that the Government of Canada encourages them to keep their culture”*

Participants noted that elders within the family persist to hold onto their cultural heritage, which is both beneficial and challenging for families.

*P7 – “For Syrians particularly, it is not easy for them to take off their coat and put on another coat easily. It will stay with them. At least this generation, they preserve everything.”*

*P8 – “The older ones, who already have their set of expectations built in and clear understandings of the culture and strong links to culture, so it is harder to break that.”*

Taken together, these responses depict the courage and resilience that FSRs demonstrate regardless of the adversity they've faced in Syria and continue to experience during settlement.

### **Acculturation Experiences**

This theme presents data about the trajectory of acculturation among FSRs as perceived by participants. This theme includes nine codes: *language skill acquisition, economic independence, legal independence, financial independence, social independence, equality, host community receptivity, adaptation, and importance of time*. These data are reflective of FSRs who have been in Canada for greater than one year, of which most have adopted the role as cultural brokers between the Canadian culture and their families (i.e. ethnic identity). Participants commented on both intrapersonal and interpersonal influences that guide acculturation within the Canadian society.

Participants shared that they have perceived a tremendous improvement in English proficiency among FSRs as a result of their attendance in ESL classes and pursuing ongoing opportunities to practice their skills.

*P9 – “They were very depressed, they came with very little language and now I’m seeing them talk fluent”*

They mentioned that for most individuals, learning English presented them with greater opportunities to participate in the community.

*P2 – “The wife was happy, because she was telling me how her ESL teacher encouraging her, finish these courses, I will help you find a job, the committee here will help you, we can put your kids in kindergarten, there is subsidy there, you can study, you can work.”*

*P10 – “Eventually, you’ll go, you’ll get positive feedback, if you are level 3 let’s say, you’ll get level 4, then you can apply for citizen when you have level 4 English, then you will have a passport, then you can go visit and come back. You have to give facts”*



They perceived fewer altercations among children with increasing English-speaking abilities. This is especially important for parents who missed programs and classes due to conflicts with the school.

*P9 – “It’s very nice to see that through the year, as it goes on, you see that these kids who were having such bad behavioural issues are now at a totally different level because I guess they’ve learned, and number one thing that’s associated with that is language.”*

As a result, FSRs have more time to focus on learning skills to obtain employment and become independent economically.

*P3 – “Once they are settled, you see that they want to work, do something else, some have started their own business”*

*P7 – “Most of them, they have at least one craft. Most of them cook and love to work in a restaurant and open a restaurant. Remember I told you they come from rural areas, so they know about agriculture and they would like to have a piece of land and work on it”*

Alongside the economic independence, participants mentioned that FSRs take an active role to learn and apply their legal rights.

*P5 – “They become more independent and know their rights over time. There are more rights here than Syria. Even though Syria has basic rights, they are not enforced well and are not exercised in Syria where the woman is under her husband’s umbrella. Women are more likely to use their rights here”*

*P1 – “Because the wives taking care of the kids, who is pregnant, feeding them, so everything has to be the wife’s name”*

Participants mentioned that along with becoming employed, FSRs advocate for their participation and are included in financial matters. A key reason for this change is that males have no choice but to adapt to egalitarianism, especially if he is or becomes unemployed in the future.

*P10 – “The child tax benefit cheque comes in the mother’s name because the children money come in her name, filing taxes is him and her, opening a bank*

*account, it has to be her name also, the lease, rental lease, it has to be also her name and signature, so they are learning there's quality. There's him and her, not only him all the time and her is always home, only, there is something, she has a very important role here."*

*P7 – "Transportation, driver's license, health, health card, banks, money matters. This is a huge area. Most of them have no idea what banks mean, probably some of them have never opened a bank account before. Now they have debit cards, credit cards, loans, so this is a totally new world for them"*

*P9 – "It's always good for the future, in case anything, let's say her husband is working and all of a sudden he doesn't have a job and he's unemployed, maybe it's her chance to step in, if that's what she wants to do and secure the future for her kids and herself"*

Finally, participants reported that FSRs practice greater social independence in comparison to their experiences in Syria.

*P4 – "I think women become more adapted to the culture here. They develop new connection in the community, they are open for their children to choose their own careers; and are open to take up new opportunities and get into the workplace."*

Participants articulated that the independent lifestyle that FSRs adopt is a direct result of individuals respecting and adhering to the value of equality within the society.

Equality is experienced as the opposite of gender oppressed roles and although it may render males powerless, it is an opportunity for growth for FSRs.

*P5 – "The culture where there is women and men equality, where women can take care of financials and drive cars. The language, employment and looking different physically."*

*P10 – "A woman work, a woman goes out every single day, whether to learn, whether to work, whether to do something with the children"*

*P10 – "The women that I saw last year, they are completely different, they look you in the eye to talk, they are pleasant, they know you have to say please and thank you and those little simple things"*

Participants indicated that community service professionals play a crucial role in facilitating and empowering FSRs to take a leadership role in the society.

*P2 – “When women come here, they feel more independent, because they are now at the schools, the teachers now at the schools encourage them to be independent, to learn the language”*

*P10 – “Maybe they did not come with lots of strength but they’re getting it here”*

Another important aspect of successful integration of individuals is the receptivity and diversity of the host community. Participants noted that Canada not only provides financial assistance and permanent resident status to these refugee newcomers but welcomes the diversity that these individuals carry with them.

*P3 – “The child tax benefit so it has increased in the past few years, so it has been to their advantage”*

*P10 – “Syrian refugees, they had their permanent residency given to them right away at the airport, they did not apply for PR. Whereas I have several clients who came here as refugees and they had to wait for a decision from the judge, then after the notice of decision that you can stay here legally, then they apply for PR, lengthy applications, pictures, documents to be sent and \$550 CAD, it costs for PR application per person”*

Participants noted that the settlement and sense of belonging of FSRs in Canada goes beyond a settlement needs checklist. They shared that FSRs perceive a welcoming environment and rich cultural values which are captured in their daily social interactions with the society.

*P3 – “Some of the things they have seen here are Canadian values, this is a peaceful country. They can manage their time that is predictable, it is not like time when there is war there. It’s unpredictable. They can plan their day, week, month.”*

*P6 – “Being a respectful citizen, learn from other cultures. Maybe value the new country and follow the society’s lifestyle. Canadian society is community-based, sharing, respect.”*

*P10 – “They felt welcomed, they felt someone help them, show them how to put the ticket in the bus and the bank, even if there is no Arabic speaking employee in the school or organization, someone was helping them, what to do, someone was helping them in the supermarket in putting things”*

In sum, participants noted that their role is to bridge the gap between newcomers and the host society. They mentioned that successful integration is when FSRs are able to adopt new cultural values while preserving their cultural heritage.

*P8 – “Giving them another view of what the culture is about to think about what they want to be and look at something else. It gives them the tools to start to think, because it’s not my job to tell them that they are not supposed to be at home, if this is their choice, that’s what they want, what their culture dictates or what they aspire as individuals, it’s the choice”*

*P10 – “They don’t want to lose their identity as a matter to their culture, but they will learn a lot of things that will add to their identity”*

*P9 – “So, getting themselves on their feet and just in order to see that they are capable of continuing even after moving to a new country. That kind of helps them strengthen their personality as well”*

Participants suggested that integration is an ever-changing process and that time is the main factor of producing any change.

*P9 – “By time, I mean for these women to heal and the time for them to access these resources”*

*P3 – “The day we saw them, they didn’t know how life was going to be here. And now, you see them are far better than other immigrants who came before them”*

*P2 – “For the families who have been here for 3-4 years, it’s just a quick referral”*

*P10 - “’Oh, remember last year, we didn’t know what to do with this and that, and look now, we know everything, we know how to drive’, so they’re learning, they just need some time”*

These responses reveal the unique path to integration of each FSR. It is evident that no matter the finished product of integration, each is an example of extraordinary strength and determination.

## **Summary of Results**

The current study investigated the perceptions of settlement workers on the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees. Five themes emerged from the data: pre-

migration experiences: ethnic identity and the Syrian Conflict, settlement needs & challenges, settlement services support, personal strength and resilience, and acculturation experiences.

These themes reflect the fluid nature of the processes and stages of integration. Generally, participants reported a pre-existing ethnic identity which is strained due to migration and is interwoven into Canadian culture, resulting in a distinctive product. The participants shared their thoughts on improving services and their hopes for the future.

## Chapter 5 – Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gather information about the subjective perceptions of settlement workers on the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees. To answer the research question, “What are the settlement experiences’ contributions to female Syrian refugee identity, as perceived by settlement workers?”, the researcher conducted a qualitative interview with ten settlement workers in a community-based settlement agency. Interviews were subject to thematic analysis. Five themes emerged from the data: pre-migration experiences - ethnic identity and the Syrian Conflict, settlement needs and challenges, settlement services support, personal strengths and resilience, and acculturation experiences. The themes reflected the various factors that contribute to forming a bicultural identity. The responses in these themes represent the bidirectional process of identity negotiations that FSRs participate in.

### **Reflecting Themes to the Literature**

In order to answer the research question, it is important to understand the factors that inform the forming of a bicultural identity. In a widely accepted framework, Berry (1995) proposed that during acculturation of individuals who are ethnic minorities, there are two challenges that they face: (1) the extent to which they retain their culture of origin (the non-dominant culture) and (2) the extent to which they identify with the dominant culture.

The theme of pre-migration experiences indicated that FSRs arrive with a pre-disposed ethnic identity which they had formed in Syria through their socializations with their culture. Participants noted key features of the Syrian culture such as the social norms that inform gender roles and expectations, the education level and economic context that the majority of Syrians live in, their understanding of health and their practice of traditional

healing, and the stigma towards mental health. Participants reported that the ideological framework of Syria is influenced by spirituality and religion, which encourages an interdependent society. It seems that each individual has outlined roles in fostering a unified and harmonious family unit. Specifically, females are expected to fulfil domestic duties, raise children and support extended family members. Likewise, males have the duty to financially support the household. Due to little access to education, many individuals are self-sufficient and work at their farms. Participants mentioned that females who live in urban areas are more likely to participate in higher education and in the employment sector. Nevertheless, the domestic duties of females remain a part of their primary role, in which case they are prone to adopt the 'triple burden'. Participants commented on the importance of community and social connectedness of individuals, especially for females. The community is considered a major source of wisdom, strength and support within the Syrian society. Participants indicated that health care is focused on traditional medicine and healing practices and so, they seldomly seek treatment through a health care professional. Community elders are primary sources of seeking help related to physical health and mental-health related issues. Participants reported that although mental health issues arise, there is limited knowledge of its origins and treatments. This seems to contribute to the mental health stigma and the hesitation of individuals to seek help. Family honour and reputation are at the core of their values, as are values of modesty and humility. Hence, support for mental health and cases of domestic violence is sought from elders in the family who mediate and resolve conflicts while maintaining privacy and endorse spiritual and religious knowledge to maintain harmony.

In hand with understanding the ethnic identity of female Syrians, it is essential to understand their incentives for migration is seeking safety from the political unrest and war in their country. Participants commented on the extents of violence witnessed by Syrian refugees, with particular focus on the impact on females and children. Females whose principal role as caretaker of the family is disturbed when they lose their children or spouse. Participants suggested that in most cases, they assume positions of their male counterparts while coping with their loss. Their traumatic experiences are significant in understanding their mental health and physical health functioning which later impact their adjustment to their relocation.

The theme of settlement needs and challenges indicated that FSRs are presented with a plethora of contextual pressures during their settlement process, in addition to the intrapersonal conflict they experience as a result of witnessing violence and navigating a culturally-dissimilar environment. In the literature, Arthur (2000) specified that cultural contrasts prompt people to become reflective about their personal cultural identity which results in changes in their worldview. In a similar light, the contrasts that FSRs experienced as perceived by participants were described. They explained that language difficulties seemed to infiltrate all the other challenges they faced. In particular, language difficulties impacted the relationship between children and parents whereby, parents started to depend on children for English translation which negatively impacted the distribution of power in their relationship with them. Participants reported that parenting is a new concept to FSRs since Syrian culture focuses on community-based parenting where the role of discipline was placed largely on the society. Additionally, participants reported that FSRs are put in positions to resolve intergenerational conflicts in the household which typically ensue



between the father or elders and the children. In some cases, clashing parenting approaches can become the reason for marital conflict. In the literature, it was described that “women are seen as vessels through which cultural values are transmitted to successive generations (Collins & Arthur, 2010). As a result, culture value conflicts are another source of acculturative stress that FSRs need to reconcile to sustain harmony in their interpersonal relationships. Participants reported that FSRs’ engagement with an egalitarian culture poses marital difficulties and increases gender oppression within the family. Participants indicated that FSRs are willing and eager to seek employment while their spouse learns English in order to secure a job. In these cases, females face the stress of the triple burden but also the covert and overt oppressive behaviours of their spouse. Participants noted that males tend to feel powerless and inferior when they no longer provide support for their family like they did in Syria.

In hand with the cultural value conflicts that FSRs reconcile, their mental health functioning poses a significant challenge to their settlement. Participants noted that many of these individuals involuntarily migrate to Canada, and so leaving their home and country brings feelings of grief and loss to the forefront. Moreover, the loss of family and their social networks further intensifies feelings of estrangement, alienation and isolation. Due to their limited knowledge of mental health, they struggle to cope with the post-traumatic memories and stress, and it impairs their ability to seek help. These experiences are in line with the literature, which suggested that the nature of the forced displacement and history of trauma gives rise to refugees’ problems, psychological distress and disruptions in normal functioning (Yakushko, Watson, Thompson, 2008). Therefore, the supports that are

available to help navigate these challenges become crucial for understanding the course of bicultural identity development.

The theme of settlement services support indicated that the initial contact for most FSRs is their settlement worker. Hence, they play a significant role in augmenting integration for these individuals into the community. Participants indicated that their main role is to provide information about the system in Canada and address the common settlement concerns of newcomers. Specifically, participants noted that their role is to acquaint FSRs with the egalitarian framework that guides the social norms in Canada. Participants reported that this is a source of conflict since the personal status law (Shari'a) in Syria endorses that a woman's testimony is only worth half of a man's (UNICEF, 2011). Likewise, FSRs are educated about important documents and the child tax benefit which arrives in the mothers' name. Canadian multicultural policy (1990) asserts that immigrants and refugees are free to retain their unique cultural values and behaviours as long as they display primary allegiance to Canadian society by acquiring one of the two official languages: English or French. Participants reported encouraging FSRs to learn English and consequently to seek employment as a means to become an active member of the society. In the literature (Collins & Arthur, 2010), it is acclaimed that it is through social interaction in the receiving society that refugees define what is expected of them and what they believe is expected from them in the new society. As a result, participants noted that they refer FSRs to community resources, encourage them to engage in their children's school, and volunteer in the community to increase their social connections and sense of belonging. Unfortunately, as aforementioned, some cases of oppression and domestic violence behaviours from the spouses have been noted by participants as a result of FSRs exercising their equal human

rights. In line with the literature, Syrian refugee males have reported that they are physically aggressive towards their spouses and children (UNHCR, 2014d). Thus, empowerment and assertiveness training are the core of settlement work, however participants reported that there is a gap in knowledge among males in understanding the legal system of Canada. This is attributable to the attendance of males to information sessions since they are typically engaged in securing employment or English learning classes. Low participation of males in information sessions can also impair their understanding of social norms and safe and positive discipline approaches towards children, which frequently results in interpersonal conflicts with their family members.

Participants noted that social media plays a key role in maintaining connection during migration. However, it was noted in this study that the participants suspected the trustworthiness of the information and the abilities of FSRs to assess this information critically. In a recent study, Dekker et. al (2018) reported that Syrian refugees are aware of information precarity and have developed strategies to validate rumours. The results of this study were inconsistent with past literature, suggesting that FSR newcomers have difficulty in critically evaluating rumours. This could be attributed to the male dominant sample in the Dekker et. al (2018) study, the location of their sampling which was Netherlands and the education level of the majority of the sample which was above secondary school. Participants in this study expressed concern over social media usage not only because it is a source of re-traumatization for individuals, but also because opinions were improperly presented as facts to FSRs.

For example, participants noted that FSRs expressed concern about the sex education curriculum at their children's school. Participants noted that FSRs typically denied consent

to sex education due to clashing values of modesty and awareness. Participants noted that while discussing this with FSRs, their main concern was that their children would be watching inappropriate and explicit videos. Participants conveyed that many of these misconceptions were spread through social media. One participant mentioned that through appropriate education and addressing concerns about the curriculum, some parents were willing to have their children participate. This does not suggest that explaining the curriculum to FSRs will result in affirmative consent but that individuals can make an informed decision with accurate information. There have been no studies that have addressed this concern in the past and these results provide evidence for the sentiment surrounding the sex education curriculum among Syrian refugees as well as the outcomes of educating and addressing their concerns.

Participants noted the difficulties in accessing services and programs by FSRs. They suggested that the attendance of FSRs can be dependent on the verbal support of the spouse to encourage their wives to attend services and by providing child care. It is theorized that males' support could be dependent on their understanding of the egalitarian system and their ability to reconcile the changing gender roles. A noteworthy finding from this study is that FSRs may become highly dependent on the services provided such as translation services, filling out government documents, and financial assistance, which in turn hinder their learning and acculturation process. Participants noted that although some FSRs are eager to learn about the system, many FSRs display passive help-seeking behaviour in their first year of settlement. This is not only attributable to dependence on services but also their mental health functioning and the impact of acculturative stress. Hijazi & Weissbecker (2015) reported that 54% of refugees experience severe emotional disorders, including depression

and anxiety which cause disruptions in their daily functioning. Yet, participants in this study noted that there are scarce mental health services available and even fewer that are culturally competent. Along with the systemic barriers, participants noted that there is limited mental health understanding within this group, and as mentioned before, stigma is a significant impediment to fulfilling their needs. In hand with the support that is provided to FSRs during settlement, participants noted that multiple barriers surface in accessing these services.

The theme of personal strengths and resilience indicated that most FSRs arise as leaders of their households in the face of adversity. Participants commented on the inherent attitudes and strengths that FSRs utilize to navigate the demands of resettlement. Asaf (2017) noted that during war, females transform their conventional identity as vulnerable populations into leaders as they adopt the role of primary caretakers and protectors of their families. In line with the literature, participants reported that FSRs endorse a positive attitude and eagerness to learn and work to become independent. Participants noted that this change in social norms are highly valuable and are major opportunities for growth and integration into the society for FSRs. Participants described that in contrast to the conventional perception that newcomers are shy to seek assistance, the majority of FSRs attend English language learning programs and are active help-seekers. Participants indicated that the display of resilience of FSRs are inspiring for their children and spouses to engage with the culture. Participants noted that through acculturation, FSRs have developed the capacity to resolve value conflicts such as autonomy vs. community. Even though FSRs become independent, their role as caretakers for the family remains central. In a study by Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez (2000), they noted that bicultural individuals move

between their two cultural orientations by engaging in cultural frame switching in response to cultural cues. Participants noted that this is attributable to both settlement education and experiences with the Canadian multicultural policy which supports culture preservation. Participants mentioned that FSRs maintain their cultural heritage through cooking, dressing, religion and social connections with individuals who share their ethnicity. The literature supports this notion and further proposes that for Syrian refugees who derive a sense of efficacy and meaning from their ethnic identity, it has a protective role in the face of discrimination, depression and anxiety (Çelebi, Verkuyten, Bagci, 2017). In addition, Worell & Remer (2002) stated that mentally healthy women experience agency, high levels of self-esteem and value oneself as a woman of strength and resilience. Thus, some refugees may not experience such profound struggles in their adaptation when they embrace their cultural uniqueness within the dominant culture.

The theme of acculturation experiences indicated that time is unquestionably the most crucial factor of integration. Participants noted language skill acquisition, legal, social, economic and financial independence among FSRs over time as they became acquainted with the Canadian system. This is reflected in the quick referrals that settlement workers provide to individuals who have resided in Canada for 3-4 years. Participants implied that individuals have reconciled the major sources of cultural clash over time, but this also suggests that acculturation is an ongoing process. This is endorsed by the literature, in which Djuraskovic & Arthur (2010) reported that “revisiting old acculturation patterns serve as a tool for resolving internal conflicts related to ongoing contact with the host culture”. Hence, the ongoing bidirectional movement of constructing bicultural identity strengthens the relationship between their ethnic culture and the dominant culture. Relatedly, participants

noted that the characteristics of the host society impact the acculturation process for FSRs to a great extent. It was indicated that Canadian human rights and governmental support are crucial, but the receptivity and acceptance of community members can increase the sense of belonging attributed to integrated individuals. The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in 2002, recognized that “integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society”. The literature (Horenczyk, 2000) suggests that refugees’ acculturation is a result of both intragroup and intergroup relations that support and challenge their ability to re-construct their sense of self. Participants expressed that FSRs have experienced a welcoming community where their diversity has been respected. In return, FSRs are keen to adopt Canadian values when they experience inclusion from others.

### **Answering the Research Question**

The themes that emerged from the data signify the key contributions in formulating a bicultural identity for female Syrian refugees. The settlement experiences narrated and perceived by settlement workers provide evidence in terms of the influences and factors that facilitate biculturalism. The data supports the notion that acculturation is not a linear process rather it follows a multidimensional course of development. Female Syrian refugees’ interactions with the society over time depict a progressively stable sense of self as noted by fewer settlement service visits and independence in multiple domains of the Canadian lifestyle.

In the literature, it has been noted that bicultural individuals speak about their dual heritage in both positive and negative terms. Benet-Martínez & Haritatos (2005) reported that “biculturalism can be associated with feelings of pride, uniqueness, and a rich sense of community and history, while also bringing to mind identity confusion, dual expectations,

and value clashes”. Thus, it is clear that each person who reconciles these cultural contrasts is forming a distinctive image using their ‘kaleidoscope’ (concept used by Collins & Arthur, 2010) of experiences. Each image is equally striking and illustrative of the human resilience.

### **Implications for Policy and Settlement Services**

Systemic factors such as public service policies tend to drive societal change. It is worth noting that most times non-dominant groups invest and make more efforts to adapt to cultural norms and practices in the host country. Hence, members of the dominant group need to be encouraged to examine the benefits of inclusion versus subjugating non-dominant cultured individuals. Through this data, it is evident that relocation and adjustment carries multiple challenges, especially for females who break socialized social norms and assume positions of authority. Berry (2003) suggested that multicultural policies and individual attempts to integrate need to be matched by institutional change in the form of diversity and equity initiatives within organizations. These can be in the forms of endorsing culturally competent practice and training in professional organizations, resolving barrier to services, and increasing public education and awareness of diversity. This study has identified that a large gap exists in the accessibility of mental health services among FSRs. This was attributed to little knowledge and recognition of mental health issues, stigma and scarcity of advocacy, limited resources, and culturally-incompetent services. Educating and training front line professionals in mental health assessments can provide mental health care earlier to individuals coping with trauma and expedite their acculturation process.

The current study highlighted areas of strength and growth for settlement support in responding to needs of FSRs. Particularly, the data shows that current settlement supports employ an adaptive approach to their services. For example, many participants noted that



settlement services evolve as the needs of their clients change. A participant noted that the English language learning program employs multiple methods of teaching language to cater to individual difference in learning styles. Settlement workers noted that results from participating in research studies allow them to identify and fill gaps in their service provision model. Although the services provided by settlement agencies are indispensable and responsive to needs, some areas of growth are proposed supported by data in this study. Firstly, it was found that settlement education is comprehensive but there may be inconsistencies in their uptake due to accessibility barriers. Many participants mentioned the hope for men's support program to increase their social connectedness within the community and to develop a social network to rely on. Next, providing additional training in the strengths-based approach of delivering services can reduce burnout and compassion fatigue among settlement workers. Participants noted that technology offers English translation applications that can be encouraged for use by clients instead of relying on settlement staff or their children. Lastly, the research on the mental health and physical needs of Syrian refugees implies that early detection and intervention can accelerate the settlement process, hence, additional training in advocating mental health support can potentially increase the retention of individuals' participation in settlement programs. In light of the changing climate of refugee status, since the Canadian government is hoping to increase the number of PSRs in comparison to GARs. As noted by participants, PSRs tend to require more services at the end of their first year, therefore, settlement services will likely experience a surplus of clients in the future. Similarly, training for private sponsor will become critical and perhaps provided by experienced individuals in settlement work, namely, settlement workers.

## **Implications for Counselling Practitioners**

The arrival of Syrian refugee newcomers in the Canadian society underscores culturally-competent practices, more than ever before. A common assumption made in the literature (Arthur, 2008) is that clients from non-dominant ethnic populations terminate counselling after the initial interview. Conversely, the participants in this study suggested that there is a shortage of culturally-competent mental health services, which is probably the reasons for the high dropout rate. This study fills a gap of understanding the settlement experiences in an often-overlooked group of refugees, females. Thus, the evidence presented not only encourages culturally-competent practices, but the inclusion of a feminist strengths-based framework coupled with a trauma-informed lens. Conceptualizing the experiences of female Syrian refugees is a complex process due to the intersectional nature of their identity. Thus, it is imperative for counsellors to be informed about the political and social persecution events and the conditions of migration that lead individuals to become refugees. Moreover, to avoid misdiagnosis, counsellors should adopt assessment strategies that identify trauma-related symptoms within the cultural context. In summary, counsellors will be able to effectively deliver their services if they are aware of the client's multiple identities.

Likewise, counsellors hold an ethical responsibility to minimize harm to the client. Working with culturally-diverse clients can inadvertently increase this risk, thus it is imperative for counsellors to self-reflect on their biases and seek appropriate consultation, supervision, and training to deal with ethical dilemmas that may arise in the therapeutic context. Counsellors would benefit from adopting an open-minded attitude to presenting concerns of individuals. This study proposes that the path to forming a bicultural identity is

complex and that clients may have difficulty in reconciling contradicting values to create a cohesive and congruent sense of self. In this case, it would be naïve to assume that the client is hoping to choose one identity over the other.

Counselling practitioners are recommended to foster a culturally-sensitive working alliance by equalizing power and encouraging the discourse of societal oppressions that impact their worldviews. This study outlined that FSRs are susceptible to increased risk of gender oppression and domestic violence when there is a drastic change in gender roles. Hence, counsellors are suggested to collaborate with the client to identify goals and intervention strategies keeping in mind their cultural values.

In summary, this study highlights how counsellors can use their professional influence towards matters of social justice.

### **Strengths of Current Study**

The qualitative nature of this study provides a rich, in-depth analysis of participants' perceptions of settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees during their adjustment. Studies in the past have focused on interviewing Syrian refugees to understand their experiences, however, this study employed the expertise and alternate perspective of settlement workers to paint a picture of the settlement experiences of FSRs. More importantly, it is worth noting that all settlement workers who were working with FSRs during data collection were included in this study. This study is particularly relevant for professionals that work with refugees since refugees may maintain a positive regard for received services and may be less likely to share their criticisms and negative experiences.

Another strength of this study is that it focused on perceptions of female Syrian refugees. Even though, female Syrian refugees didn't participate in this study, the

perceptions of settlement workers inform the lack of applicability of gender homogenous samples in past studies.

### **Limitations of Current Study**

A limitation of the current study is that the majority of participants were female settlement workers. This is not uncommon since, most settlement agencies have a greater number of female employees rather than males. Hence, there could be differences in the perceptions of their male colleagues.

### **Summary of Conclusion**

Political conflicts resulting in war and unrest tend to be a major cause of population displacement in the world. Evidently, those who flee are seeking refuge until the conflict subsides. However, most times, individuals realize the bleak chance of returning and have no choice but to relocate their lives. In efforts to do so, they generally experience both benefits and losses at each phase of their migration and settlement experience. This study employed the expertise of settlement workers as participants to understand the contributions of settlement experiences in forming female Syrian refugee bicultural identity. Settlement services aim to augment integration of these individuals in their host society. Likewise, of particular significance is the personal strength and resilience of these refugees that help them to overcome the difficulties of re-settling. Overall, these acculturative experiences transform one's sense of self as they integrate new cultural demands into their previously formed ethnic identity.

### **Further Research**

Future research may include the perspectives of female Syrian refugees to confirm or refute the experiences outlined by settlement workers. Even though government policies and

programs focus on providing assistance to females during war, there is limited knowledge about their experiences. Further research on protective factors such as culture preservation, resilience and social connections is needed. Lastly, longitudinal research on bicultural identity formation among female Syrian refugees can be a worthwhile avenue.

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# Appendix A - Ethics Certificate



**Date:** 8 February 2018

**To:** Dr. Jason Brown

**Project ID:** 110697

**Study Title:** Perceptions of Settlement Workers on Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** March 2 2018

**Date Approval Issued:** 08/Feb/2018

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 08/Feb/2019

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Dear Dr. Jason Brown

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 must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Demographics Survey v1	Paper Survey	22/Jan/2018	1
Interviews Schedule v2 - clean	Interview Guide	22/Jan/2018	2 - Clean
LOI: C v2 - clean	Written Consent/Assent	22/Jan/2018	2 - Clean
POSTER v2 - clean	Recruitment Materials	22/Jan/2018	2 - Clean

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No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Appendix B - Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title: Perceptions of Settlement Workers on the Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees

Principal Investigator  
Dr. Jason Brown, PhD,  
Western University

Additional Research Staff  
Sheffy Bhayee, MA Candidate  
Western University

You are being invited to participate in this research study titled “Perceptions of Settlement Workers on Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees” because you provide settlement work and assistance to newcomers to Canada (including Syrian refugees).

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to better understand the settlement experiences of Syrian refugee women into the Canadian society. This study will explore the gaps in literature on the experiences of Syrian refugee women as they forge a new identity within the Canadian culture taking on new gender roles and expectations.

**Participation:** If you agree to participate you will be asked to participate in one 60 minute audio-recorded interview with a researcher where you will complete a short paper demographics survey and then answer questions that will revolve around your interactions with Syrian refugee women in helping them navigate the challenges of integrating into a new society, your self-reflections of their unique adjustment needs, as well as your understanding of the barriers and opportunities present in bicultural identity formation. This interview will be audio-recorded to ensure data reliability; however, you can still participate if you do not agree to be recorded, in which case the researcher will be taking detailed paper notes during the interview. It is asked that you do not share any identifying information about the refugees you discuss, nor provide any specific information about another individual’s story. You have the choice to complete the interview either in your office space or at the Public Library), meeting room (to maintain confidentiality of your participation).

**Potential risks:** It is possible that the nature of questions may elicit emotional discomfort or distress. If you feel any emotional discomfort during the interview, you are encouraged to refer to community counselling resources such as the 24/7 Reach Out Distress line (519-433-2023) and CMHA Middlesex Crisis Response (519-434-9191).

**Potential benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you, but you may find the personal and professional reflection beneficial. The possible benefits to society include informing professionals on settlement needs from a gendered perspective, to aid policymakers on the allocation of community resources targeting a crucial and often overlooked group and contribute to the scarce literature on refugee women’s needs and challenges in a new cultural context.

**Withdrawal:** If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., written, calling, etc.) withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have

your information removed please let the researcher know and all traces of your information will be destroyed from our records. **NOTE:** once the study has been published, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

**Confidentiality:** After completing the consent form, you will be assigned a study number for all study records thereafter to help protect your confidentiality. Although the data from this research project will be published and presented at conferences, the data will be reported in aggregate form, so that it will not be possible to identify individuals. Unidentified quotes can also be reported to create a comprehensive narrative for the reader. These quotes will be de-identified, and, in any case, pseudonyms will be used. You are free to opt-out from the use of unidentified quotes, simply check off “No” under statement “I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research” on the consent form. If the results of the study are published, your name or any identifying information will not be used. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

**Limits to Confidentiality:** If you disclose any information of clear and imminent danger of harm to self, children, vulnerable adults and/or others, the researcher is legally required to report this information to the authorities responsible for ensuring safety.

**Data Storage:** The researcher will keep any personal information about you in a secure and confidential location for 7 years, at the seven-year mark, the data will be destroyed/deleted. A list linking your study number with your name will be kept by the researcher in a secure place, separate from your study file. The informed consent form will be scanned and stored electronically on an encrypted hard drive, all paper forms will be shredded thereafter. All paper demographics surveys will be transferred to an Excel document and paper surveys will be scanned, transferred to an encrypted hard drive and shredded. The data file of the audio recording will be uploaded to an encrypted hard drive, only accessible to the research team. All electronic data (data entered on Excel sheet, digital audio recordings, interview transcripts) will be password-protected and stored on an encrypted hard drive. Only members of the research team who have signed confidentiality agreements will have access to the data.

**Compensation:** You will be compensated \$20 for your time in participating in this study. Compensation will still be provided if you choose to withdraw from the study after signing the informed consent form or skip questions.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time it will have no effect on your employment status.

You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Principal Investigator: Dr. Jason Brown or Research Student: Sheffy Bhayee.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics (519) 661-3036, 1-844-720-9816, email: [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca). The REB is a group of people who oversee the ethical conduct of research studies. The HSREB is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

**This letter is yours to keep for future reference.**

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Perceptions of Settlement Workers on Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees**

*Principal Investigator*  
Dr. Jason Brown, PhD,  
Western University

*Additional Research Staff*  
Sheffy Bhayee, MA Candidate  
Western University

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. I understand all the limits to confidentiality and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio recorded in this research

YES  NO

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES  NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date (DD-MM-YYYY)*

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name of Person  
Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Date (DD-MM-YYYY)*



## Appendix C - Recruitment Flyer



### **PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH IN SETTLEMENT WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS**

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study exploring the settlement experiences of female Syrian refugees who meet the following criteria: you are a settlement worker at <<settlement agency name>> who has worked with female Syrian Refugees AND you are fluent in English.

If you are interested and agree to participate you would be asked to: participate in an audio-recorded interview with a researcher who will ask questions directed at your perceptions of working with female Syrian refugees.

Your participation would involve one interview session,  
which will be about 60 minutes long.

In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$20 at the end of your participation.

Please contact:  
**Sheffy Bhayee**  
**Faculty of Education, UWO**

**Principal Investigator**  
Dr. Jason Brown  
Faculty of Education, UWO

## Appendix D - Demographics Survey

1. What gender do you identify with?
2. What is your age and how long have you worked in this field?
3. What racial group closely matches yours?
4. What other languages, if any, other than English do you speak or understand?
5. What is your educational background?
6. What does a typical day at work look like for you?
  - a. How often do you see your clients?
7. Are there any qualifications that allow you better serve this population? (ex. language, ethnic background, gender, migration experience)
8. If you were to estimate, how many Syrian refugee clients do you think you have worked with to date?
9. Is there any special training you completed to work with the Syrian refugee population?
10. Did you immigrate to Canada?

## Appendix E - Interview Questions

1. Do you perceive a difference between private and government assisted refugees?
  - a. Probe: Do you work with both?
2. Do you perceive any common issues among Syrian refugees (coming from war torn countries) compared to any other immigrant newcomer?
3. What is your understanding of the expectations/roles of Syrian women back home?
  - i. Economically?
  - ii. Socially?
  - iii. Family?
  - b. How are these different from men?
4. What is the meaning of “health” and “well-being” to Syrian refugees?
5. What traumatic experiences are present in Syrian refugee women prior to their arrival in Canada?
  - a. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low and 5 being high, how would you rate the mental health resources present for these women upon arrival to Canada?  
1      2      3      4      5
  - b. Would you please explain why you rated at this level?
6. What are some losses’ female Syrian refugees experience as a result of migration?
  - a. Probe: which one seems to be the most challenging/most common/most persistent?
  - b. How do these affect the settlement process?
  - c. How do settlement services respond to these needs?
    - i. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being low and 5 being high, how confident do you feel in responding to these needs? Why?  
1      2      3      4      5
7. What are the differences in settlement needs of Syrian men and women?
8. From your perspective, what barriers exist for a Syrian refugee woman integrating into the Canadian society?
9. What are some strengths/cultural values that allow this particular group of individuals to integrate into society?
  - c. What are some **new** values that are important to adopt as a Syrian refugee in Canada?
    - i. If any, how do these affect the family dynamics?
    - ii. If any, in which cases are these **new** values an opportunity for growth?
10. To what extent do they preserve their Syrian culture/ heritage?
11. As a settlement worker, what changes do you perceive in Syrian refugee women over time?
12. How would you define “identity”?

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Sheffy Bhayee

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2016 - 2019 M.A.

University of Toronto  
Mississauga, Ontario, Canada  
2011 - 2015 B.Sc. (Hon.)

**Honours and Awards:** Western University Entrance Scholarship  
2016-2018

University of Toronto Undergraduate Research Award  
2015

**Related Work Experience:** Psychological Services – Counselling Intern  
Western University  
2018 - 2019

Teaching Assistant  
Western University  
2018 - 2019

Group Therapy Facilitator  
St. Joseph’s Hospice  
2018

Distress Line Volunteer  
Spectra Community Support Services  
2016-2017

Recreation Therapy Volunteer  
William Osler Health System – Mental Health Inpatient Unit  
2015-2016

**Research Experience:** Research Assistant  
Regulatory Affective Dynamics Lab  
University of Toronto  
2014 - 2016

Research Assistant  
Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion Processing Lab  
Ryerson University  
2015

Research Assistant  
Self -Knowledge and Interpersonal Perception Lab  
University of Toronto  
2014-2015

**Presentations:**

Bhayee, S., Khalid, D., Carlson, E. (2015). Interpersonal Signature of Mindfulness and Self-Compassion. Poster presented at the Society for Interpersonal Theory and Research, Toronto, ON.

**Publications:**

Bhayee, S., Tomaszewski, P., Lee, D. H., Moffat, G., Pino, L., Moreno, S., & Farb, N. A. (2016). Attentional and affective consequences of technology supported mindfulness training: a randomised, active control, efficacy trial. *BMC psychology*, 4(1), 60.