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## **Refugee Motherhood and Mothering: Adversities, Resilience, and Agency**

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*Through using intersectionality as a critical framework, this article focuses on refugee mothers' challenges, resilience, and agency within the context of forced migration from Southeast Asia to Canada. It explores the unique context of Karen refugee mothers who were relocated to Canada following their initial displacement from their villages in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) to various refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border and asks the following question: How do Karen refugee mothers deal with adversities in the resettlement process, and do they regard their gendered roles positively or negatively? I conducted qualitative, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten first-generation Karen refugee women residing in London, Southwestern Ontario. The interviews investigate how refugee mothers feel about their gender roles regarding motherhood, mothering, and responsibilities and how they renegotiate gender roles and remake mothering practices while dealing with problems in the settlement process. My study aims to fill the knowledge gap about minority refugee mothers' resettlement narratives in a culturally grounded family context. Based on the findings, I argue that it is not possible to fully understand women's agencies in the context of forced migration without looking at their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class.*

### **Introduction**

In the 1980s, scholars highlighted women's active participation in migration and focussed on how women's immigration affects families, the family division of labour, and gender roles. Regardless of women's identification as immigrants or refugees, studies show that their migration experiences are shaped by gender roles, and it is crucial to scrutinize how migration influences their roles as mothers (Bouris et al.; Curry Rodriguez; Glenn et al.; Ortiz Maddali;

McKinnon; Valenzuela). This is because, as Julia Curry Rodriguez argues, mothering is a relationship and action in which the biological mother has physical contact and fulfills a caring relation, situated in the original, natural, or existing position (214). Moreover, refugee mothers may face numerous and interconnected challenges as they navigate life in new and often hostile environments. Consequently, these challenges can affect their ability to provide for their families and integrate into new societies, as well as access legal support, economic opportunities, healthcare, education, and social services, which are essential for their wellbeing and successful resettlement.

Through using intersectionality as a critical framework, this article focuses on refugee mothers' challenges, resilience, and agency within the context of forced migration from Southeast Asia to Canada. I specifically explore the unique context of Karen refugee mothers, who were relocated to London, Ontario, following their initial displacement from their villages in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) to various refugee camps on the Thailand-Burma border for over two to three decades. This article investigates how Karen refugee mothers deal with adversities in the resettlement process and whether they regard their gendered roles positively or negatively. The intersectionality theory emphasizes the significance of women's lived experiences and the issues of intersecting oppression of race, class, gender, and sexuality, arguing that women's experiences can be empowering to them (Crenshaw; Collins). I also engage with other feminist scholars who examine family stories of forced migration from war zones and relevant peer-reviewed articles. Regarding my primary data collection, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten first-generation Karen refugee women in person.

The study involved first-generation Karen refugee women aged twenty-five and older who were relocated to Canada under the government-assisted refugee program; they were married or had common-law marital status and lived with immediate family members. Interviews did not include recently arrived Karen refugee women still navigating settlement procedures. A sampling of research subjects was achieved by using convenience and snowball techniques (Bryman and Bell 245) to capture a wide range of Karen refugee women, including a Karen community leader and young women activists. The sample consisted of people between the ages of twenty-seven and fifty-five, and they had been in Canada between six years and twenty years. Out of ten participants, four women became mothers in Canada (i.e., their children were born there). A bilingual interview assistant was hired to record and transcribe Karen narratives into English. Seven participants answered the questions in English, while three answered in Karen. York University's Office of Research Ethics granted ethical approval, and I have replaced the participants' names with pseudonyms.

The interview questions were structured into two parts. The first part focussed on demographics and background information, and the second included semi-structured questions, focussing on specific themes like family-related stressors, relocation challenges, and coping strategies related to gender roles and responsibilities. Based on the findings, I argue that it is not possible to fully understand women's agency in the context of forced migration without looking at their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class. Moreover, helping refugee mothers, especially those from protracted refugee situations, requires services that are sensitive to their culture and an approach that looks at all aspects of the problem, focussing on family-centred solutions. To this end, this article suggests family-oriented solutions to make English as a second language (ESL) classes more accessible, effective, and efficient for refugee mothers.

### **Background of the Karen People**

During the British colonization of Myanmar in the nineteenth century, Karen people were recruited for police and armed forces and fought for British allies during WWII to gain their autonomy. However, when Britain granted independence to Myanmar in 1948, the Karen were forced to join the Union of Burma. A Karen insurgency gained momentum over the years but was fought off by government troops, and the Burmese military eventually took power in 1962. A consistent pattern of deliberate human rights violations by the Burmese military forces drove tens of thousands of Karen to Thailand as refugees, making the Karen conflict one of the world's longest rebellions.

Since the Thai government is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees from Burma are treated as undocumented immigrants and confined to camps, leading to protracted exile situations. Most refugees in Thailand are from the Karen ethnic group (79.1%), constituting one of Myanmar's eight major national-ethnic groups (Burrows 2). In 1995, the Burmese army launched major offensives against the Karen National Union (KNU) government-in-exile, forcing many Karen to flee. About 140,000 Karen refugees ended up in nine remote camps along the Thai-Burma border until the Thai government and the UNHCR reached an agreement in 2005 to resettle all of them (MacLaren et al. 64, 66). Between 2005 and 2007, the UNHCR arranged for fifty thousand Karen refugees to resettle in three countries: Australia, Canada, and the United States (Mantel 103). In 2005, 810 Karen refugees were accepted into Canada and in 2007, approximately two thousand more Karen refugees agreed to be brought (Government of Canada); 208 were resettled in London, Ontario, and the others in Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton (Erdogan17).

## Theoretical Framework

Motherhood scholars use the term “patriarchal motherhood” to emphasize how patriarchy shapes motherhood as an institution to control women, reinforce gender inequality, and serve male-dominated power structures and institutional norms. For instance, Adrienne Rich provides two meanings of “motherhood”: the first is the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and her children; the second is the institution of mothering, which is important to social and political systems aiming to ensure that all women remain subject to male control (7). Rich’s theorization emphasizes that motherhood is a male-defined patriarchal institution that regulates women’s reproductive and domestic labour, perpetuates traditional gender roles, and profoundly oppresses women, thereby limiting their autonomy. However, Andrea O’Reilly defines “motherhood” as being male-defined, controlled, and deeply oppressive to women but “mothering” as female-defined, female-centred, and potentially empowering to women, thereby shedding light on two contradictory processes women experience. Moreover, O’Reilly posits that motherhood is not primarily a natural or biological function but a cultural practice that undergoes continuous redesign in response to shifting socioeconomic factors. She explicitly states that motherhood is a cultural construction whose meaning varies with time and place. Thus, there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood (“Matricentric Feminism”).

There is a clear distinction between the two processes and practices (i.e., motherhood and mothering), depending on the reality of patriarchal motherhood and given its existence not just across cultural differences but also via migration experiences (i.e., its meaning varies with time, place, and pattern of migration). Ideas about motherhood and mothering do not exist in a vacuum. How mothers conceptualize attitudes and expectations about their children and themselves, particularly migrant mothers, influences how they mother in new and challenging environments.

Exploring intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, and socio-economic status, is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant mothers.

In this regard, intersectionality, a framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, becomes a useful tool for analyzing how systems of oppression intersect and shape motherhood in diverse ways, examining how various social identities intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Particularly for migrant mothers, intersectionality offers a framework to comprehend the intricacies of their individual mothering experiences and the broader social structures that shape these experiences, whether their migration is voluntary or not. In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins

explores the unique experiences of African American mothers, emphasizing intersectionality in understanding their experiences. She highlights the importance of considering the broader social structures shaping these experiences and contends that understanding Black mothers' experiences necessitates understanding the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and other social categories in women's day-to-day lives. In many African American communities, mothering extends beyond the biological mother to include grandmothers, aunts, and other women who take on mothering roles. This collective approach to mothering is both a response to systemic challenges and a means of community survival and resilience. Black mothers often engage in resistance and activism as part of their mothering practices (187–98).

Collins highlights Black mothers' role in teaching children to navigate oppressive systems, economic challenges, cultural traditions, structural inequalities in the labour market, and welfare policies. She advocates for policies supporting Black motherhood, including equitable access to resources, childcare, healthcare, and education. Collins's work on Black motherhood and mothering underscores the complexities and strengths of Black maternal practices, thereby highlighting the resilience, agency, and collective strategies Black mothers use to resist systemic oppression (198–210). Collins's intersectional approach is particularly relevant as a theoretical framework for my research because it helps to understand the complex factors shaping refugee women's motherhood experiences and mothering practices in a resettled country. These refugee mothers' individual experiences can vary based on their unique combination of social identities, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity, and these identities do not exist independently but interact in complex ways that can amplify disadvantages or privileges. Moreover, by considering multiple identities and the interconnected systems of obstruction, I can examine how Karen refugee mothers demonstrate agency in their day-to-day lives despite facing numerous challenges and how their agency contributes to their resilience, adaptability, and proactive efforts to improve their situations and those of their families.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Participants' Backgrounds***

Among the ten Karen refugee women, seven stated they were Christians and three were Catholics (Catholics and other Christians share many beliefs but differ in their interpretation of the Bible, the role of church tradition, and the sacraments). All of them spent time in refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border for several decades before relocating to Canada. Three participants were born in refugee camps, and their entire childhood was spent there until they resettled in London, Ontario. Six came to Canada as mothers, and four became mothers in Canada.

### ***Most Troublesome Roles in the Settlement Process***

When asked, “Do you have any specific role(s) or responsibilities that give you the most trouble in the settlement process?” all six women who migrated to Canada along with their children responded with the same answer: Being a mother and mothering their children in a new place caused the most stress and trouble during the settlement process. One mother who came to Canada without a child responded that not knowing to speak English caused her the most trouble, as well as using Google to search for places she needed to visit, especially the doctor’s. Interestingly, the responses from the remaining three individuals who migrated to Canada as children or youth with their parents were similar. They described how they unexpectedly took on multiple roles for other family members, such as interpreters, breadwinners, and caregivers, and how they adapted to their new environment much quicker than other older family members; they were also students in Canadian elementary and secondary schools.

### ***Gender Roles***

Another commonality among all participants was that all these refugee mothers practised coparenting with their spouses, even though some received childcare from other kinships, like grandparents and siblings. The participants identified specific physical and domestic tasks that their husbands performed as the “man of the house,” such as mowing the lawn, moving and repairing the furniture, maintaining the house, changing car tires, assisting with laundry and dishwashing, and disposing of garbage. The specific tasks that participants perceived they must perform due to their gender role as women of the house included domestic chores, such as laundry, cleaning, and cooking, as well as primary caregiving responsibilities, including bringing their children and parents to doctor appointments. No participants raised concerns with their spouses about sharing domestic chores or mothering responsibilities. These findings are consistent with my previous study, “Motherhood and Gender Role: A Study of Employed Myanmar Diasporic Mothers in the Greater Toronto Area” (published in 2024). However, all interview participants in that study came to Canada through other migration patterns, such as spouse/family sponsorship and live-in caregivers (May-Kyawt).

### ***Perception of Gender Equality***

When questioned about their perception of gender equality concerning their relationships with their spouses within the family context, all participants demonstrated a certain level of knowledge about gender equality such as “women and men are equal” and “no one is inferior,” citing the education they received in the refugee camps facilitated by the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO). During their stay in the camps, two participants (Aye Than and Gu

Ruru) volunteered as women leaders and teachers to protect children and adults from gender-based violence and child abuse. All participants stated that they enjoyed gender equality at home and had no concerns about it with their husbands, but they understood gender equality in their own cultural and traditional context.

Participants repeatedly emphasized the following examples of gender equality at home: supporting each other, being respectful, making decisions together, comothering, both working outside the home and sharing house chores, helping each other, sharing and caring, and not taking advantage of each other. Here is how some participants explained it:

I do enjoy gender equality in my home because my husband and I work together fifty-fifty. We made decisions together and supported each other. For example, before making any financial decisions, we talked about it together. (Nya Nya Say)

To me, gender equality is understanding each other and supporting each other. I am grateful that my partner is respectful and treats me as his equal. I do enjoy it because we made decisions together for our household and our children. There may be some adjustments, but at the end of the day, we make important decisions together. (Sai Roong)

Notably, one participant said that gender equality goes beyond mere equality, as a husband and wife may require additional assistance at some point. “I think gender equality goes beyond a simple fifty-fifty split; for me, it requires more to ensure a successful relationship, as there will be days when I am sick and need more [assistance]. There will be days when my husband is sick and needs more help” (Bee). Grace, who stopped working (after maternity leave) when she became a mother with two children (a two-and-a-half-year-old and a ten-month-old), had a different understanding of gender equality. Grace wanted to continue working, but she did not want to send her kids to daycare, so she decided to stop working until her children turned school age. While her husband went to work, she stopped working to fulfill her mothering responsibilities, and her decision supports her concept of “gender equality,” where the husband works, and the wife stays at home with the kids. She said: “Gender equality is important [when] someone [a husband] is working, somebody [a wife] just to take care of the kids for sure.”

Similarly, Nu Nu, who had stopped working with her two children (a seven-year-old and a one-year-old), expressed optimism that she would have more time to provide care for her children and her ailing father: “I am happy that I can stay home to take care of my two daughters, raise them, and have more time to teach them.... I am happy that I can take care of my dad and go to every hospital appointment.” Daymu, who was born in Karen State, Burma, and stayed in a refugee camp from the age of six to sixteen, has three children



(ages one, five, and six), and admitted that women have more opportunities to enjoy gender equality and freedom in Canada than in Burma. “Back home, men have more power over women, but here, we are all equal, and women have more opportunity and freedom.” In essence, the participants believed that being supportive, mutually respectful, codecision making, and sharing domestic work and childcare were the key elements of building positive gender relations in their day-to-day lives. The intersection of other aspects of their identity, such as forced migration, cultural background, the challenges they face in resettlement, and their interactions with Canadian society, contributed to a more nuanced perception of gender equality in the context of Karen refugee mothers. While they may have perceived progress and optimism in certain areas, such as gender roles and responsibilities within the family context, they often overlooked or downplayed ongoing challenges, such as racial discrimination and social inequality within the Canadian context. Moreover, maintaining more traditional gender norms in the Karen community context may put new generations under pressure to conform, hindering their ability to fully embrace or experience the gender equality that Canadian society promotes.

### **Karen Refugees: Motherhood**

The findings suggest two factors influencing the subjective aspects of Karen refugee motherhood. First, as discussed in the previous section, Karen refugees’ perception of gender equality, coupled with the presence of caregiving support from their spouses, contributes to the fact that all participants do not view their motherhood as oppressive or discriminatory; they assume primary caregiver roles as “women of the house.” Second, their country’s cultural traditions and practices shape how Karen refugees perceive Karen motherhood, including the transmission of cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and community ties. Most participants believe that Karen women in Myanmar, the camps, and Canada practise a cultural tradition of staying at home with the children while performing domestic chores like cooking and cleaning. For instance, Grace explained: “I stay at home with the kids while he [husband] works, ensuring our [children’s] timely feeding.” Therefore, Grace decided to stop her employment until her children turned school age.

All the employed mothers in my sample claimed they prioritized their children when seeking jobs and choosing shifts. For instance, Sai Roong, who received caregiving help from her parents, considered two alternative options as a primary caregiver: “I have a child, and I make it my first priority. It can be a challenge to find a job that will fit into my schedule. I am a professional childcare provider, so I chose a job that allowed me to bring my child to work with me or find a schedule that works for me.” Another employed woman

whose children were already of school age tried to work different shifts to make sure one of the parents was available for morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up from the school: “My husband and I both work but we work opposite shifts. [When] I go back to work my husband works from 5:00 am to 1:00 pm shift, and then I do the evening shift. This is how we attempt to overcome (for caregiving)” (Bee).

Furthermore, these women continued to follow their cultural traditions in Canada, which included cooking and eating meals together, participating in family prayer at the church regularly, and performing prayer exchange services in someone’s home when necessary. O’Reilly argues that motherhood is a cultural construction; its meaning can vary with time and place (“Matricentric Feminism” 15–16). Karen refugee women define the meaning of motherhood by following their cultural traditions and their perception of gender equality; they choose to stay at home or go to work based on their economic needs and the availability of caregiving help, independent of male control, and they do not feel any oppression or negative emotions associated with motherhood. In other words, the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and cultural tradition shape their understanding of motherhood.

### **Karen Refugees: Mothering Experiences in the Settlement Process**

When asked about their mothering experiences in Canada, my participants’ mothering-related challenges came from three main stressors: role reversal, place-related, and losing cultural traditions. These stressors disrupted their mothering during the settlement process in Canada.

#### ***Role Reversal Stressor***

The interview findings suggest that role reversal stress emerges from two factors: First, there is a sudden shift in traditional mother-child roles in Karen refugee families during the resettlement process. The main root cause of role reversal between mother and child is when children adapt more quickly to the new language, culture, and societal norms than their parents. As a result, Karen refugee children not only take on responsibilities traditionally held by their parents but also assume the role of primary communicators within the family. They often handle such tasks as translating for their parents during medical appointments, school meetings, or interactions with settlement agencies. This can lead to significant stress for both the children and their parents, particularly the mothers. Second, there is a sudden switch of the women’s roles from educators and teachers in the camps to ESL students or new learners in the host country.

For instance, Sai Roong, who was eleven when she arrived in Canada and was born in the Mae La Oon Refugee Camp, expressed her stress at having to

suddenly take on caregiving responsibilities for her parents and younger sister despite being a student:

My roles and responsibilities in refugee camps were as a student and as a daughter. My parents took care of everything for us, and our responsibilities were staying in school and doing house chores. My parents were the providers and caregivers. But as soon as we arrived in Canada, my parents were relying on me, and the roles reversed very quickly. As a child, I learned English faster and learned to adjust to our new environment quicker.... I became the parent/caregiver, and I had to look after my family. For example, my sister and I were ten years apart. I ended up having to be a parent to her in some ways, such as attending parent-teacher meetings while still in high school.

Grace, who was fifteen years old when she arrived in Canada, was under a great deal of stress because her parents relied on her as a translator when interacting with the hospital, insurance company, and bank because they were not provided a professional interpreter by settlement agencies or banks:

In Canada, my parents didn't know the language [English] until now ... so they relied on [their] children. I do have to help him [my father] when going to the hospital and like insurance stuff and banking. The bigger issue is banking ... they want to invest money for saving ... I tried to explain it but did not know all the vocabulary ... there was like a risk involved that, for example. if you put your money in the risky market, you get more returns like more interest ... I did not know about it either.

Gu Ruru, who was twenty-seven when she arrived in Canada and spent about fifteen years in refugee camps, took on the role of protector for underage children and elderly people as a social worker during her stay in the camps. However, the language barrier ruined the way she used to help her children in the camp, thereby giving her so much stress when she resettled in Canada: "Mothering experience in Canada was very hard because you know other people's children have the opportunity to have the support that they need. I wanted to do that for my children, too, but I could not do it ... my children ... ask for help with their homework, but I cannot help them. So sometimes my kids cry because I don't know how to help them."

### ***Place-Related Stressors***

My participants acknowledged that they were in a war-free zone; however, they still felt unsafe and were particularly concerned about their children's safety once in Canada. They had no idea which areas were safe, what local dangers to watch out for, and how to protect their family in a new environment.

These safety concerns led to constant worry, affecting their mental health and the ability to focus on other important aspects of resettlement, such as finding work or integrating into the community. Nya Nya Say expressed that the mother's role caused the most trouble in an unfamiliar place during her settlement process:

One of the roles that gave me the most trouble in the settlement process was being a mother. With a new country and new laws, I had to make changes and adjust my parenting style. For example, back home, the children can go anywhere, and I know that they will be safe because everyone knows each other, but here, the children can no longer go out on their own, which can be seen as taking freedom away from them. That can cause a huge conflict and issues between children and parents.

Similarly, Gu Ruru was deeply concerned about raising her children upon her arrival in Canada. She felt unsafe if her children wanted to go out at night, and she also worried about them becoming involved in drug-related activities. Considering these concerns, she decided to cease her employment and remain at home until her children reached a certain age, which she deemed appropriate for them to leave alone after school. Conversely, she experienced depression due to her lack of income: "I have a lot of worries ... for example, not to go out at night and not to get involved with drugs or like stuff that they are not supposed to ... when they are old enough to look after themselves, a little better for me to manage. So, when she [the child] was young, I stayed home to look up ... I feel depressed because I have no income."

### *Losing Cultural Traditions*

The fear of losing cultural traditions was one of the profound stressors for Karen refugee mothers while raising their children in a new and vastly different cultural environment. My findings reveal a deep connection between this stressor and concerns about identity, belonging, and traditional preservation, which are crucial for mothers' and their children's self-esteem. My participants feared their children would lose touch with their Karen cultural roots, including language, customs, religious practices, and traditional values, as they quickly adapted to the dominant culture, gradually eroding their country's original cultural identity. My participants expressed significant distress over the potential undermining of Karen traditions and culture, which can result in feelings of loss and grief:

The kids here when they go with friends, I worry ... he [my son] said a bad word to me, so I got heartbroken, and I cried. When the kids come home [with friends] and lock the door, I worry and give them a time limit. (Chi Chi)

We attempt to keep our culture and teach our children, such as we do not encourage our children to live together (with boyfriends/girlfriends) before marriage because it is a big deal in our culture. (Chi Chi)

In the refugee camp, children were taught to respect their parents, but children here in Canada know their rights. (Daymu)

She [my daughter] said that she learned from her friend that [dating between two girls] is good. You know here (in Canada) the school promotes LGBTQ ... maybe they [students] misinterpreted what they learn from school. The school is just promoting not to discriminate among the LGBTQs. In the school, they teach sex education, but I think it is not necessary for my daughter's age yet. (Nu Nu)

In Canada, I cannot use harsh ways or words to my children, and I am afraid to discipline [my kids] because children know their rights ... they have too much freedom and misuse it. (Aye Than)

Notably, none of the participants (who did not go to school for a career) highlighted the impact of economic stressors but frequently expressed how language barriers can interfere with their parenting practices. Instead, some of them happily shared their experiences of trying to secure jobs through their friend networks, such as cleaning and farm jobs, all of which offer minimal pay and lack financial security. This could be why all my participants identified their spouses as family breadwinners.

### **Karen Refugee Mothers' Agency in Action**

The concept of agency emerged within feminist and postcolonial studies to understand how marginalized individuals, such as women, migrants, and ethnic and racial minorities, actively resist their adversities within societies (Kanal and Rottmann 2). Collins underscores how different aspects of identity (such as race, gender, class, etc.) intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege and involve navigating these intersections and finding ways to thrive despite multiple layers of marginalization. Similarly, the Karen refugee mothers in London, Ontario, despite facing significant challenges in the settlement process, exhibited agency in their day-to-day lives by making decisions, acting, and navigating their new environment in ways that reflect their resilience, adaptability, and determination for the wellbeing of their children and their families. Various aspects of their daily lives manifested this agency, often in subtle yet powerful ways.

The findings indicate that my participants assumed primary roles in mothering-related responsibilities and overall family wellbeing, thereby

taking critical roles in their children's education and wellbeing, navigating social services, cultural adaptation and preservation, and building social networks. Language barriers and unfamiliarity with the educational system made it difficult for Karen refugee women to support their children's schooling. However, they found ways to overcome challenges, often seeking help from settlement agencies or community organizations while simultaneously learning English. All my participants attended ESL for a minimum of one year to a maximum of five years, and how long they took in ESL depended on their age and background upon arrival in Canada. For example, children and youth who completed elementary and secondary school (funded by NGOs) in camps needed just a year to settle in Canadian schools. This might be why seven participants were comfortable answering the questions in English, although they all faced language problems upon arrival in Canada. Another three participants had a limited understanding of English, but they felt more comfortable and confident when responding to my questions in the Karen language.

For instance, Gu Ruru's narratives (having lived in a camp for fourteen years) demonstrate her serious commitment to helping her children with their homework and to learning English and new things in Canada to overcome the challenges of settling in a new place.

When I got here [London] when my children were sick, it was such a big issue for me because I did not know where to go and how to get there ... it is giving me stress ... I went to a Church program once a week, where the Canadians helped newcomers with the language homework, and I took my children. This is the way I could help with my children's homework.... Sometimes we don't know how to get in and get out of a bus.... To overcome these challenges, I attended ESL school ... this is where I started learning language and learning more about new things.

Gu Ruru was one of the enthusiastic participants, and she tried her best to respond to my questions in English. She revealed that she attended an ESL class for four years, where she encountered a diverse range of students from various age groups. She expressed her excitement at becoming a Canadian citizen, having been without a nationality for fourteen years in the camp. When I asked about any challenges she faced in learning English among a diverse range of older and younger students, she responded: "I don't care who is good or bad in ESL class; I tried to go to ESL school seriously because I wanted to do a citizenship test."

Generally, the participants employed three coping strategies to overcome these challenges. First, they sought caregiving support from spouses and othermothers (e.g., daughters and grandmothers). Some participants had older

sons, but they only sought caregiving and school-related help (such as translating in parent-teacher meetings) from their younger daughters, even during the most challenging resettlement periods. This traditional source of support from women-centred networks contributed significantly to their ability to cope with the challenges they faced while resettling in Canada.

For instance, Sai Roong and Grace, who were as young as eleven and fifteen, respectively, when they arrived in Canada, were required to perform caregiving responsibilities and serve as translators for their parents. During the settlement process, Sai Roong and Grace shared their experiences of managing multiple roles, such as student, caregiver, and translator. Fortunately, their mothers now provide them with caregiving assistance. Sai Roong can currently manage a full-time job with her two children, ages seven and one, without the need to send them to daycare school, thanks to the caregiving assistance she receives from her mother. This finding demonstrates to what extent “organized, resilient, women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers” (Collins 193) are key in understanding how women-centred agency contributes collectively to their resilience, adaptability, and proactive efforts to improve their situations and those of their families.

Second, all my participants maintained a positive outlook and optimism for the future, which is a powerful coping mechanism. They focussed on the opportunities that new environments offer despite the challenges they faced, thereby prioritizing their children’s education, employment opportunities for themselves and their spouses, and citizenship, all of which can give them a sense of purpose, direction, and self-motivation. Some examples are as follows:

When I arrived in Canada, I did not understand any words.... After three years in ESL, I can speak some English ...I try to go to school [ESL] seriously because I want to get citizenship ... I do not expect anything from the government agency in particular. I just accepted what I received, whatever they gave me, and then I tried to focus on preparing for the citizenship test. (Gu Ruru)

We can work here to support the kids.... To stay here, it’s a very good opportunity for my kids and very good to live in Canada where we can compare it in camps ... you know it’s like hell and heaven.... The good thing here is we have a right.... We worry when we have to move when living in the three camps because we don’t have a country. When I came here, you know, like we don’t need to worry about anything because we are safe ... we don’t need to worry about food we don’t need to worry about anything because my husband can find work here work. (Chi Chi)

I received child benefits [in Canada] and tried to manage as much as I could to pay back for my flight ticket loan.... I didn’t know what I

was supposed to receive from government agencies. All I knew was to come here to get away from the situation back home and for my family to be safe. (Aye Than)

Some participants who arrived in Canada at twenty-seven reported that wives and husbands engage in various types of work, such as cleaning and some machinist jobs, where they do not need to speak English extensively to earn a living. My participants showed appreciation for their jobs, regardless of their nature, because it was something they were not permitted to do in camps:

He [my husband] attended ESL for two years. I think I improved [more] than him. But he got a job through a Karen friend's referral. He worked as a metal worker [machinist] because he didn't need to speak English. (Aye Than)

When I moved to Canada, I worked at the hospital as a cleaner and cook, and I [took] care of my girls. (Chi Chi)

Third, all participants continued their cultural traditions and religious practices to cope with stress and to balance the cultures between the sending and receiving countries. For instance, Sai Roong, Nya Nya Say, and Nu Nu explained how believing in God and prayer service are important to overcome challenges and problems. They attended church regularly, and sometimes, they asked the church leader to come to their houses and pray together. Grace and Bee firmly believed that reading the Bible, attending church regularly, and engaging in prayer provided them with strength, reduced stress, and fostered positivity and gratitude for all aspects of life. Some participants stressed the importance of instilling cultural values in their children, as follows:

When I go to church, I tell my daughter to wear our traditional clothes ... at school, not to wear very revealing clothes ... and no makeup ... in the house ... to respect the pillow that we sleep on and also ... do not wear shoes inside the house.... When we walk to the front of the adults, we bow a little bit to show respect. (Nu Nu)

The Karen cultural value that I taught my children to overcome life challenges or prohibit problems was to be kind. The Karen are known for being hospitable, so I always taught my children to make friends rather than make enemies. (Nya Nya Say)

Keeping our Karen cultural values is very important to me. My children need to know their roots, history, and their backgrounds. Even though we are in a third country, I often share stories with my children about Karen, including watching videos online. I want to make sure they have the privilege to be born here, but it doesn't mean they don't have to work hard. (Sai Roong)



In summary, the intersectionality of refugee women's identities—encompassing gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class—plays a critical role in shaping Karen refugees' agency during the settlement process in Canada. While these intersecting identities can create significant challenges and constraints, they also provide opportunities for refugee women to exercise agency in various ways.

## **Conclusion**

This article explores the intersecting identities of Karen refugee mothers—such as their gender role, race, migration patterns, socioeconomic background, and language proficiency—and how these identities profoundly shape their settlement experiences and mothering practices in Canada. These multiple, overlapping identities interact in complex ways, creating challenges and opportunities as they navigate rebuilding their lives in a new country. Three stressors (role reversal, place-related stressors, and losing cultural traditions) disrupted my participants' mothering during the settlement process in Canada. Despite the challenges, these refugee mothers demonstrated remarkable resilience and three coping strategies: seeking caregiving support from spouses and othermothers, maintaining a positive outlook and optimism, and continuing cultural traditions and faith-based religious practices. These women's agency in day-to-day lives significantly contributed to resisting intersecting challenges and creating unique experiences of privilege as “a Karen woman of the house” and a member of Karen women-centred networks in their community. Based on the findings, I argue that, in the forced migration context, women's agencies cannot be fully understood without identifying their stressors and other aspects of intersecting identities, such as mothers, othermothers, gender roles, race, ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic status, and class.

All participants stated that they enjoy gender equality at home and have no concerns about it with their husbands. Their perception of gender equality, coupled with the presence of supportive spouses, contributed to the fact that all participants do not view their motherhood as oppressive or discriminatory; they assumed primary caregiver roles as “Karen women of the house.” They believed that being supportive, mutually respectful, making decisions together, and sharing domestic work and childcare were the key elements of building positive gender relations in their day-to-day lives. None of the participants from my sample regarded their mothering responsibilities as oppressive or as an example of gender discrimination. Holding onto traditional patriarchal beliefs, such as the idea that mothers should be the primary caregivers, reinforced the perception of progress and optimism within the family context.

However, they often overlooked ongoing challenges, such as racial discrimination and social inequality within the Canadian context. Maintaining more traditional gender norms in the Karen community puts new generations under pressure to conform, hindering their ability to fully embrace or experience the gender equality that Canadian society promotes.

My research is limited to a sample of ten Karen refugee women, who do not represent Ontario's entire Karen women population. However, my findings bridge the knowledge gap about minority refugee mothers' resettlement narratives in a culturally grounded family context. Understanding and addressing the complex and intersectional nature of Karen refugee women's experiences highlights the need for future research that explores how policymakers, service providers, and communities can better support refugee mothers, particularly those from protracted refugee situations, in their journey towards integration and empowerment in Canada. The results also show that helping refugee mothers, especially those who have been refugees for a long time, requires services that are sensitive to their culture and an approach that looks at all aspects of the problem with a focus on family-centered solutions. Particularly, ESL classes are a critical resource for refugee mothers. However, their current structures and one-size-fits-all approach seem to be falling short of meeting the unique challenges and needs of the Karen refugee group. ESL classes categorize learners based on their general proficiency levels, but they neglect to consider variations in literacy or formal education and lack culturally relevant content. Placing refugee mothers from protracted refugee situations, who had limited or interrupted schooling in the camps, in the same class as younger learners hinders their ability to thrive in generalized programs. Curriculum design seems to overlook the specific needs and experiences of refugee mothers, such as practical language skills for navigating healthcare, schools, or housing systems.

Based on the findings, I suggest some family-oriented solutions to make ESL more useful for refugee mothers. These include categorizing learners based on the same ethnic group with small class sizes and the same family members with different ages rather than always emphasizing proficiency levels, particularly for those who are attending ESL for job-hunting purposes; offering flexible class schedules, including facilitating online learning options and on-site childcare; providing transportation support or mobile ESL services in refugee-dense areas; and incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds and life experiences into lessons. Implementing an intersectional approach with family-oriented strategies can create an inclusive environment where refugee mothers feel supported and empowered by policymakers, service providers, and communities. This approach ensures they have the resources and opportunities to rebuild their lives and contribute to Canadian society, fostering resilience, integration, and mutual understanding.

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