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The Role of Refugee Women Narratives in the U.S. Resettlement Process

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Introduction

On November 9th, 2016, I am crying openly in the quiet, second-floor backroom of a church. The room is filled with refugee women and resettlement staff who are equally teary eyed. I can't really say much or maintain eye contact; I am too ashamed. One woman reaches out and touches my knee. She doesn't say anything. No one does. There is nothing we *can* say; the shame, anger, and fear choke out all words. We had just elected a new American President, and his stance on refugee and asylee resettlement meant significant uncertainty and fear in the years ahead. No one knew what this election would mean for the family and friends of current and incoming refugees and their families, and that uncertainty was terrifying.

Prior to the 2016 election of now President Donald J. Trump, my research in refugee resettlement dealt in the ways that resettlement agencies could create spaces and structures for refugee women to share their narratives. Specifically, I had been working closely with a refugee resettlement organization in Central Virginia on their creation of a women's group. The group was intended to create a specific and safe space for refugee women to connect with other refugee women and discuss topics that were, otherwise, difficult to address. Transportation, female translators, and childcare were all important sticking points that had been discussed and prioritized. I had shared crisis coaching resources from my time as an online hotline volunteer, and we had carefully articulated what my role would be within the implementation of this group (read: minimal). My research was meant to observe and document the group's struggles and successes. I had hoped to eventually include input from the refugee women who participated, many of whom I had already developed relationships with through my time as a volunteer with the resettlement organization's Cultural Orientation Class. November 9th was to be the first day of our pilot program, and it was also the very last.

While the exigence of this research began in late 2015, the project underwent drastic changes in light of the political chaos surrounding the refugee ban enacted by Donald Trump on January 27, 2017. In the weeks that followed, refugee resettlement centers across the United States prepared for the worst as they anticipated a significant cut to their funding. With an immediate ban on refugees from seven different countries¹, refugee resettlement agencies paused all unnecessary resettlement programming. These agencies, many of them church and community based, already operated on minimal funding and the radical shift in American leadership signaled that this funding may vanish altogether. In response, the agencies paused, resettlement froze, and the Women's Group, that had been so tenaciously crafted and fought for by the resettlement agency I was observing, disappeared altogether.

I share this moment not because it makes me upset (which, admittedly, it does), but because it serves as a testament to the entire purpose of this piece. In short, women's voices and experiences are unimportant to, and hold no place within, the larger patriarchal social systems that inherently shape the American resettlement process (bell hooks, 2010). Rather, refugee women's experiences and voices are often absent from the larger conversation, or, when included, largely framed within a dominant narrative of female fragility (Lennette, 2015). The immediate dissolution of the Women's Group, a single space specifically crafted for refugee women to bear witness and be seen, stands as one small testament to the many ways that women's voices are systematically silenced.

¹ The countries impacted were Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia.

Purpose

Despite the chaotic nature of the new Trump administration and the challenges it posed to the refugee community and this project, it felt absolutely necessary to push ahead with the main focus of this study: seeking and bearing witness to the voices and experiences of refugee women within the United States. As a community, we need to lift up the voices of those affected by policies enacted by individuals in power. We need to hear the lived experiences of refugee women *from* refugee women, and reshape the ways in which we think about resettlement and refugee identity.

When proposing this investigation on the absence of refugee women's lived experiences within American policy and general discourse, I turned to Kate Smith (2015) and her research on refugee resettlement. Smith (2015) argues that "public perceptions of refugees are primarily represented as male, overlooking women's stories and allowing for men's stories to be the dominant narratives told about refugees' lives" (p. 462). Smith (2015) then goes on to highlight the ways in which refugee women are often represented in policy, discourse, and media as vulnerable and at risk. She argues that seeking the direct narratives of refugee women serves to disrupt this "dominant narrative" and engenders a form of resistance that results in a "counter narrative". My effort to follow in Kate Smith's footsteps and pursue this type of research was fully informed by Paulo Freire (1971), who clearly explained that "who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (p. 29). Freire's recognition that marginalized members of society are the authority on their experience greatly shaped the execution of this research piece. Further, Caroline Lenette et al. (2015), provided additional tools to back this approach, explaining that "...counter-narratives can provide a critical lens to reveal enabling processes often overlooked in dominant discourses" (p. 990).

While seeking counter narratives serves to disrupt and combat parochial dominant narratives, it is vital to observe the ways in which refugee women choose to represent themselves and demonstrate their agency. Counter narratives rarely fall into the preconceived notions or expectations of dominant discourse or tragedy trope, and instead reflect the diversity, complexity, and conflict of identity. Lennette's call (referenced above) asks that we recognize that narrative reflects "*a* telling" rather than "*the* telling" (p. 990). Instead of focusing on whether a narrative is 'natural' or correct, Lennette suggests that we instead focus on the *who* and *how* of the narrative. Who is telling it, and how was it constructed? While it is challenging to seek these counter narratives, specifically because of the typical structures of power that often work against these voices, it is crucial to undergo the exercise. These structures of power can manifest in a number of ways, including patriarchal structures that fail to forefront the specific needs or challenges women may face. In my observation of the Central Virginia resettlement agency, one challenge frequently revolved around a lack of childcare access. Without access to childcare, women refugees frequently could not attend the English tutoring sessions that were provided by the resettlement agency. If childcare *was* available at the session, then women often found themselves being interrupted by their child or the childcare nanny during the session. This then often stunted English language acquisition, and sometimes led women refugees to rely entirely on their male counterparts as an interpreter. As the resettlement agency interpreters were often former refugees and/or unpaid volunteers, this led to situations where women refugees had no objective space to speak or audience who could hear them. This observation is just one of many structures of privilege and power that impact the ability of women, in this case women refugees, to share their narratives, challenges, and solutions with those who shape the resettlement

structures that impact their lives. This situation is even identified by the UNHCR in a collaborative study with the Centre for Refugee Research of the University of New South Wales, stating:

Refugee women and girls have not yet attained substantive leadership roles in community and camp management committees, as well as community justice systems. Moreover, displaced women are seldom included in consultations on potential durable solutions and conflict resolution. [...] This overall lack of participation means that the special needs of women and girls, in particular the most vulnerable, are often not adequately acknowledged or addressed, with long-lasting consequences for themselves and their communities. Their knowledge, expertise and capacity are lost to these processes (UNHCR, 2011).

It is important to note that misrepresentation of voice and narrative is not a uniquely gendered problem, yet there is still a distinct absence of direct narratives by refugee women on their resettlement experience. In fact, this sort of gendered silencing has been previously noted by rhetorician Cheryl Glenn (1997) who specifically demonstrates how feminine representations of agency and choice may not always be vocalized. In *Rhetoric Retold*, Glenn (1997) sharply examines the concept of a 'silent narrative', emphasizing the need for silence to be recognized as its own form of narrative: "Silence is not necessarily an essence; it can be a position — a choice" (p. 177). While this struggle with narrative holds true for all refugees, refugee women who come to the U.S. often find themselves directly conceptualized as victims without agency or voice, largely due to the framing of women as the physical face of vulnerability (Lenette et al., 2015). And, while it cannot be ignored that many refugee women do face abuse, it is problematic that

refugee women are rarely represented outside of that spectrum and are instead frequently denied their own representations of agency.

This fluidity of identity speaks to the unique space that refugee women inhabit. The identities constructed by these women exist within multiple contexts of power, social networks, and political structures. When becoming a refugee, both women and men find that they assume a new identity of 'refugee', which provides its own set of scripts and expectations. They are then often pulled into 'performing' the identity of refugee by the very structure and implementation of the resettlement process (Hyndman, 2010, p. 456). Upon entering the United States, many refugee women are met with a different set of expectations and what Hyndman (2010) would call "the ruptures and sutures of identity" (p. 455). These ruptures provide important insight into the subtle and overt connections between power and identity and speak to the potential for refugee women to "create self-empowering narratives of their own life journeys" (Lennette, 2015, p. 990).

One reason I chose to apply feminist research theory within this field was the need to understand how gender politics influences identity construction and how the resettlement process exists within the larger landscape of political, economic, and societal forces. The implications of this specific form of investigation, of listening-rhetoric, for feminist researchers lies in the desire "to tap the rich potential of person-based studies, fostering opportunities for even deeper transformations and broader invitations into the field" (Glenn, 2011, p. 48). Further, by listening closely to and valuing the lived experiences of refugee women, this study sought to embrace the desire by feminist researchers and rhetoricians to "rewrite rhetorical history and theory, to represent and include more users and uses of rhetoric, to represent ethically and accurately the dominant and the marginalized alike..." (Glenn, 2011, pp. 50-51). Feminist interviewing

techniques and analysis enabled me as a researcher to embrace narratives that may be otherwise seen as unconventional or ‘incorrect’, per Lennette’s warning. Through this approach, I was frequently reminded of Cheryl Glenn’s emphasis on silence and the various ways in which women demonstrate and communicate their agency and sense of identity. Feminist theory emphasizes this same call to the importance of “authentic thinking” and careful listening, where women’s experiences are recognized as relevant data and evidence (Freire, 1971; Glenn, 2011).

The Study

Because of my desire to conduct this research as a feminist activist, I am compelled to disclose my own history and personal bias as it relates to this study. My interest in refugee resettlement began in 2010 as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Roanoke, VA, while I was still an undergraduate in university. My assignment was with the local Refugee and Immigration Services (RIS) agency for that city, and I found myself suddenly serving a part of the community that I had been entirely unaware of prior. The refugee center was severely understaffed, having lost two employees within the first month of my service commitment. As a result, I found myself taking on the role of caseworker, health coordinator, tutor, and volunteer. I worked long hours; developing strong bonds with the families I served and learning the importance of carefully seeking and listening to the narratives of those I worked with.

Role and background of the researcher

In this study, I have used positionality to mean that my own subjective experiences shape the ways in which I engage with others, create questions, and interpret data. It is this emphasis on positionality that forces me to acknowledge the limits on my objectivity within this research, as well as to recognize the reciprocal nature of this project. While volunteering with the Central Virginia resettlement organization during this study, I frequently found myself uncomfortably

caught between the roles of volunteer and researcher. While one role required service, the other insisted that I explore and interrogate. Further, I was deeply aware that as a white, college educated, cis-gendered, American woman, I embody certain notions of privilege and power. While I have personally experienced a degree of poverty and interacted with many of the social services refugees encounter, my language, cultural understanding, and personal experience remain different and privileged. I am also deeply wary of our tendency in Western culture to value agency and the sharing of story as an expression of strength and power. Although there is evidence to demonstrate the power of story, the ownership and impact of that story wholly depends on the narrator and their audience as Lenette et. al (2015) asserts:

...the desire for narrative about refugee experiences may seem to imply that storytelling and the sharing of personal experiences are crucial for *all* refugees. This is not the case. Not all refugees want to — or even should — share their stories. Thus, individuals have the right to choose if, when and how they share experiences (p. 1000).

Consistent with Lennette's claim and the values of feminist-based research, it was this ability for choice that I sought and prioritized. In my role as a feminist, activist researcher, it was imperative for me to conduct research that was consensual and reciprocal. To this end, I remained committed to integrating and serving within the community as a resettlement volunteer throughout the completion of my research. Further, my positionality as a white, cis-gendered woman pushed me to continually look inward and question my role as a researcher.

Methodology

This research was part of a larger Master's Thesis project examining how the resettlement experiences and narratives of refugee women do, or do not, impact the resettlement structures they operate within. This research piece focused on a small sample size of women refugees

within a Central Virginia resettlement area. Although I was conducting research within this specific resettlement agency, I was also a volunteer there and had developed many relationships with both the refugees and staff. These relationships served to deepen and ground my understanding of the space these women inhabited, and, while data from such a case study does not provide generalizable findings, it is my hope that the narratives witnessed might contribute compelling insights into the ways in which some refugee women communicate their identity, integrate within the community, and construct narratives that contradict and resist the dominant discourses that generally work to victimize and infantilize them.

For this piece, I have included four interviews: two with members of the resettlement organization's staff and two with refugee women who had recently resettled and expressed interest in participating in this study. My decision to include interviews with resettlement staff is intended to demonstrate the current resettlement structures at play within this agency and to provide additional context to the narratives shared by refugee participants. All refugee and resettlement staff participants were given pseudonyms, chosen by the participant, to protect their identity. Specific locations have also been changed or anonymized to protect the identities of participants. In order to better forefront these narratives and avoid the co-opting of others' voices, I have included large sections of each interview and reserved the bulk of my analysis for the discussion section of this article. However, it remains important to recognize the positionality of the researcher and acknowledge that what is written here is only my understanding shared through the lens and bias of my own experience.

Each participant was provided the interview questions prior to the interview and was given time to consider their feedback (interview questions can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B). The interview questions, as well as the resulting de-identified data, were granted

IRB approval for data collection and dissemination. As a feminist researcher, it was imperative to me that all participants had an understanding of the purpose of the research before undergoing an interview. Initially, this information was to be provided within the first few meetings of the Women's Support Group, allowing for participants to self-identify and share their narratives over the course of a month. However, as mentioned previously, this study was entirely transformed by the policies of the Trump administration and, upon the implementation of the refugee ban, funding for the women's group evaporated.

Context for the study

Since this ban (and a second, revised refugee ban) occurred during the course of this research, the interview method had to be altered and the number of interviews was reduced. Instead of recruiting from a single group, I had to locate and approach participants individually about the study. To do this ethically, I needed to work with participants who previously expressed interest in participating within the Women's Support Group and showed a willingness to speak with me. This method took time, requiring considerably more hours on the ground than anticipated. I provide this explanation not to excuse my method, but instead to demonstrate the many complexities that emerge when trying to conduct this type of research. There is a clear absence in refugee women's narratives within resettlement research and policy, and one reason for this gap might be the time required to establish the groundwork necessary in which to receive those narratives. It is this gap that motivated the continuation of this study, despite the abrupt changes and fewer than anticipated interview opportunities. Working to create a space for women's narratives to emerge within a larger resettlement structure, particularly when that structure appears to actively resist the creation of that space, does not diminish the importance of those narratives. Without valuing the narratives of refugee women, we cannot begin to uncover

and acknowledge — as a community — the concerns of that population. That is why it was so vital to include refugee women’s narratives within this study, as it would be groundless without them.

Refugee Women’s Narratives

Rosette Kazadi (pseudonym), Resettled from Rwanda (location changed)

“Our stories can help others. So, when you ask the question about our stories, we are free. We are free, and we are open to give the answer.” -Rosette Kazadi

I met Rosette during the resettlement organization’s Cultural Orientation Class one week after she and her husband, along with three of their children, resettled in Virginia. They were, and are, strongly affected by Trump’s travel ban, as one of their sons was held in a U.S. airport and another son and daughter remained trapped in their home country. They do not have any way of speaking with their daughter and son, and this is clearly a great source of pain and anxiety for Rosette and her husband.

When talking about her children, Rosette twists her beaded bracelets and looks to her youngest son who is cooking in the kitchen. We are sitting in the living room of her new apartment while her family, smartly dressed and fresh from church, takes over the cooking of Sunday lunch. On the menu today, Rosette tells me in halting English, is pan fried chicken in oil, cooked with white and black pepper alongside store-bought french fries. The whole room fills with the smell of cooking oil and smoke, as her interpreter walks Rosette through the study’s consent form. She is agreeable, dismissive even, as she signs the form and waves off my concerns. “Any questions you have,” she says in French, “I will answer.”

Researcher: I know that people ask you a lot of questions. Do you feel like you have to tell your story over and over again to people asking you questions, like me?

Rosette: We are open to everyone who wants to know our story.

Researcher: But, what makes you want to share that story? What motivates you to share that story?

Rosette: ...my story. I can't forget my story. I can't forget history, because that story is going to help me to grow.

[Rosette's youngest son drops a piece of chicken into the hot oil and it splashes up and sizzles loudly. Rosette jumps from the couch, rushing to take over the cooking and chiding her son. The interpreter laughs and explains their conversation to me.]

Eventually, Rosette returns to the living room, smiling and shaking her head. In broken French, I ask her and the interpreter “Ça va? Nous commençons? *Everything okay? We start?*” and Rosette nods. My attempts to speak French are childish at best, particularly when compared to Rosette's fluency in six different languages, but it feels important to try — to practice. In this way, we are both working to communicate, and that collaboration upsets the power dynamic where English is the expected standard. So, slowly, and with the help of an interpreter, I begin chatting with Rosette and asking how she feels her narrative has helped others:

Rosette: Mmm...well [laughs and twists the bracelets on her arm]. Trump's decision has affected us, also. Because we still have two children in Rwanda, one daughter and one son. And now, we try to ask why our children didn't come? Because, every Sunday there are some refugees who come from Rwanda to the U.S., but not here [Rosette had heard about refugees arriving in other U.S. cities, but not in her particular community] ... So, we don't know why. Why our children don't come?

Researcher: You don't have any way to speak with them?

Rosette: The last time, there was a meeting; the Senate has sent...what's it called? Some people come to ask about the problem here in [city name withheld]. I was one of the refugees who was invited, and I exposed my history and told them about my children. There was a riot [referring to a protest] here, and they were going to take it to the Senate? But, we are still waiting to see the result....

In this exchange, Rosette is describing a recent interview her family gave to the local newspaper. In that interview, her husband shared how the travel ban impacted their family, and how, at that time, their eldest son was being held in the airport. In the newspaper's interview, Rosette's husband carries the conversation, but you can see Rosette in the photo. She looks strained and tired, a stark contrast from the cheerful, optimistic woman I was then interviewing. Although she was not quoted directly within that story, an unspoken narrative about the stress of her recent resettlement and the division of their family can be seen in the one look she gives that camera. The language Rosette uses to describe this interview is also compelling as she describes it as having "exposed her history" to an outside group that was then "going to take it to the Senate". This juxtaposition makes the exchange feel like her narrative was literally picked up, taken and used as an instrument of combat. When she says "...we are still waiting to see the result," Rosette is of course referring to her two remaining children, to whether they will be able to join her in the States. However, there is also the sense that she is waiting to see if her story, and the story of her family, will have an impact on the larger political forces at play. Her narrative — a counter narrative to the official stories of bans and tenuous U.S. security — is her power, and Rosette has chosen to leverage it when and where she can.

Sarah (pseudonym), School Liaison & English Language Training (ELT) and Resettlement Coordinator

“We don’t ask [refugees] to share their story because they have been asked to share their story thousands of times [usually by customs and social services officials throughout the resettlement process]. Hundreds of thousands. And it’s not relevant to our work, to our ability to serve them. It’s not enough to be curious, their narrative has to serve a purpose.” – Sarah

I met with Sarah over lunch at a local Vietnamese restaurant. We grabbed a table near the back as people began to trickle into the small restaurant for lunch. In our corner, we were somewhat isolated from the crowd, allowing for our conversation to remain intimate despite all the noise around us. Having known and worked with Sarah many years ago in at a different refugee agency, there was no need for small-talk. Instead, after reviewing and signing the consent form, Sarah immediately launched into the interview, bursting with what she needed to say. I could barely turn the recorder on fast enough.

Sarah: ...there is funding specifically for cultural orientation [class] but...it’s like a checklist. They need to be told about these fifteen topics, and a lot of them are the topics that are done in our class. But, like, our class is much more in-depth than most. As far as I can understand, for some people, the initial orientation they do with the family, when they first come in, they go through and say like “this is when you call 911, etc.” and that’s cultural orientation. And, so what we’re doing is definitely more. There’s not really support for the model that we’re doing.

Researcher: But, you’ve chosen to do it that way for a reason, right?

Sarah: Right, because it’s needed. It’s important. But, it’s something that’s so fluid because what is needed changes so incredibly much depending on who is in the class, which changes a lot.

Researcher: In order to meet the needs of specific communities.

Sarah: Exactly, and we're always having to twist [the program] ... there is no guidance on that sort of thing. It's always just the invention of the people who have the inspiration to do it. But, also, we're always trying to twist - I mean most of our grants are really specific about what they do. So you have to find a way to make it part of something else, and that puts constraints on it. Or, it's simply not part of anything and someone [usually a volunteer, intern or resettlement employee] is just putting in extra time. I think it's just the trend in funding to try and make programs like ours more efficient, to be very specific about outcomes and goals and what you're supposed to accomplish. But, it also means that there's not as much room for adapting to a local context or to like giving a staff person who has a lot of ideas the room to develop them.

In this exchange we can see that the resettlement staff are deeply aware of a need within the community for a space that embraces conversation. This awareness is particularly amplified when considering refugee women's needs, as evidenced by the agency's attempts to establish a Women's Support Group. The reality that creating such a group is proving deeply challenging not only stems from inadequate resources and cultural challenges, but also derives from a lack of federal and organizational leadership. During our discussion, Sarah emphasized the "progressive" stance taken by her organization toward addressing needs specific to women and the LGBTQ+ community. Much of this progression, however, is not unified within the organization and often depends on the initiative and dedication of individual staff members. The Cultural Orientation Class is a product of a caseworker at the resettlement agency, and it is not a requirement or best practice handed down from organizational or national resettlement leadership. Rather, the class is a response from staff to the received narratives and perceived needs of refugees resettling within their particular community. Sarah's emphasis on "adapting to a local context" is particularly striking here, as the staff's awareness of audience proves to shape,

not only the information that is shared, but *how* that information is shared. When considering whether narrative is valued within the center, it is clear that while narrative may not be directly sought out from individuals and prioritized by resettlement staff, there is value placed on the experiences of refugees when identifying how best to serve them. However, without a structure upon which to build, staff are often left to create their own frameworks for how to receive and respond to these narratives, all while working with limited information, resources, and funding.

The ways in which refugee narratives could serve to shape these frameworks is shown succinctly by Sarah as we discussed whether refugee women's narratives were welcomed and utilized within the resettlement process:

Sarah: Ok, so, I'll only talk about this briefly because, obviously, there's some confidentiality around it. But there have recently been five cases of new arrivals becoming pregnant who probably weren't intending to. And, that's also become a big question for me. How do we talk about contraception? Because, some people have asked for that information, but I just haven't been able to be connected to any meaningful services... And, now...like, that [pregnancy upon arrival in the U.S.] is not what anybody wanted. And, I feel like that relates to what you're talking about with women's narratives, and who's talking? Who's asking? [...]

Sarah: ...contraception for women versus contraception for men, and who's controlling that? And, some people might say, they want contraception, it's available - they can take condoms from the Health Department or whatever... but, because of this moment [recent pregnancies among new arrivals], I started thinking that—people need this information. We don't need to make it hard for them to get. But, I think what you're talking about with narratives and women is the still missing piece there, because we have no idea how most of these [refugee] women think about [contraception/sex/family planning]. We don't know what they want, we don't know what

they'll use, we don't know what they know how to use, so we're just completely... [Sarah becomes quiet].

The silence at the end of Sarah's sentence was where a singular insight was grasped by both of us. It seemed to me in that moment, that we were both working to understand whose voices were sought out and valued when shaping programming during resettlement. And, more specifically, why we didn't know more about the needs of our clientele (noting again that over half of refugees are women). It is this specific moment and insight where the value of narrative, and the space to receive that narrative, is best identified.

Pauline (pseudonym), Intensive Community Orientation (ICO) Member

"I think women see the world differently from men [due to the various systems of oppression that women live through and encounter]. If you translate that into refugee women, where the men are constantly making all the decisions and these women are worrying about...when are we going to get to the U.S.? Do I have a pad, because my period is due this week? Is someone going to come into my tent tonight and rape me?" – Pauline

When Pauline arrived for our interview, she was windswept and out of breath, her purse brimming with paperwork. "Sorry I'm late," she breathed before sitting in the chair across from mine. "I got a Social Security appointment mixed up with a Social Services appointment, and I had to trek across town." Pauline is often strapped with work. Her position as an AmeriCorps service member means that she is responsible for not only the Cultural Orientation (CO) Class but for transportation, coordination of volunteers, and other crucial administrative tasks that are essential to the agency. Her work is significant to this study because it was Pauline who had approached me earlier in 2016 about the creation of a Women's Support Group.

Researcher: So, the Women’s Support Group. I know it’s not happening right now — [Pauline laughs] and for obvious reasons [as noted above], but...what were/are the challenges to establishing this group and what were/are your hopes?

Pauline: [...] So, first, accessibility, making sure that people actually come. Having female interpreters for obvious reasons. If someone is talking about a trauma or if their husband is...they want to feel comfortable. Like, if it’s a medical issue, they want to feel comfortable. Also, does it need to be an interpreter that is not within their community? So, for those women who are feeling judged, maybe not utilizing a refugee woman, but instead a stranger that can come in once a week. Another challenge is, what topics should we cover? [...] I’m realizing, however...that we’re not offering any information on women’s health in the CO class. We talk a lot about general information [...], but “Suzanne” [the volunteer ESL instructor] will do one English class where she takes women aside and teaches them about tampons, feminine hygiene and birth control, but it’s just the one day. We have a handful of pregnant women who are active clients, and I’m not sure if any of them have received information about family planning. So, that’s something [...] Do I, someone who’s never had a child, teach a class about caring for kids [...]? Or, do I focus on birth control? Would that be offensive because of cultural norms? [...] At the same time, the hope for this class is to open up the conversation about... because, as much as I can teach them about the types of birth control, etc. [...] I want there to be a whole array of information that everyone is open to. I want to make sure that [the women’s group] is an open and inclusive and safe space for everyone.

When trying to answer whether narrative is specifically valued within this Central Virginia resettlement agency, it becomes evident through the narratives of both refugee participants and resettlement staff that the stories of refugees are an essential foundation for

many of the programs headed by the agency. Resettlement staff are in constant communication with their clients and, for that reason, are continually assessing the impact of their services. Remembering again that many of these services are initiatives headed, built, and funded through the efforts of a small group of committed staff, it becomes clear to me as a researcher that refugee narratives provide crucial insight and guidance towards next steps.

Listening to Pauline's concerns and challenges about the Women's Support Group, there is clearly a lot of uncertainty. She cannot be sure that this group will coalesce, that the funding will remain, that volunteers will arrive, and that refugee women will want to join. These are all challenges that the group will need to overcome, and yet there is still an urgency to create this space. In their interviews, Sarah and Pauline both identified an urgency to establish stable and accessible resources for sex education within the resettlement agency. Considering that many women have varying levels of sex education, access to birth control, and pregnancy knowledge, this need is not a new one within the resettlement community. However, as Pauline points out, the shifting nature of the refugee demographic means that resettlement staff must also shift and forefront different skills and literacies. Within the narratives of the five pregnant women referenced by Sarah, a catalyst begins within the agency to specifically forefront and address women's sexual health. Yet, without direct support from the federal government or resettlement leadership, the staff are left with both a logistically and culturally complex task. Further, the grant that funds Pauline's work restricts her ability to create this space by specifying which aspects of refugee resettlement that she can address. Taking all these hurdles into account, when asked what primary structure and/or resource would be most needed to access narratives of refugee women, Pauline had one emphatic answer:

Pauline: Refugee women need to learn English.

Researcher: Really? That's a challenge... Why not female interpreters?

Pauline: I think that interpreters are great when you're trying to relay very important information. When a certain meeting is, when you have to be at your home, etc. [...] But, I think a lot of time they can be a crutch. I think, once people — women — start learning English on their own, it's really...they can get around by themselves. They can read this sign, they can help their children with their homework. I think that... that [language acquisition] is the key to empowerment. Because, if you're able to do all these things without your husband who has been interpreting for you for six months, then it's like... wow. A light bulb goes off. [...] I'm not saying that 'everyone in America needs to speak American', I mean, like, you literally have to know English if you want to survive.

Shabana Abidi (pseudonym), Resettled from Pakistan (location changed)

"We want people to ask about our family and we want them to give us a solution. How can we see our family again?" - Shabana Abidi

When I entered Shabana's home, she and her family were seated with a member of the Linking Communities (LC) group that is sponsored by the local resettlement organization. The LC group is a way of integrating refugees into the community by introducing new refugee families to established residents. These residents will help newly arrived refugees to navigate their new home and cultural differences. After a brief introduction, the LC group member leaves, waving goodbye to Shabana's ten-year-old son who blows kisses from his small wheelchair. Shabana's husband shows me to a seat while Shabana immediately emerges from the kitchen with tea and a generous plate of food. Over a late lunch, we catch up on recent events, mostly discussing her son's therapy treatments. It has been close to a month since I last spoke with them at the CO Class and, since then, they have undergone many treatments, and her son's ability to

walk has greatly improved. “We give thanks to God for this amazing new treatment that allows our son to play — he is always smiling,” Shabana says in English, “We are very happy in our new home.” Shabana and I then talk at length about the purpose of this interview as she looks through the paperwork carefully, asking questions about privacy, purpose, and intent. Much like Rosette, Shabana carries herself with confidence and expresses a distinct willingness to share her narrative. “I am happy to share my story if it helps someone; God willing,” she says.

Shabana: In [the country where Shabana and her family first fled to wait for asylum], no one cared or understood. They put people like us under much mental stress. We didn’t deserve that treatment, and they just didn’t understand. In America, people understand and they try to protect us from that mental stress.

Researcher: So, you would say that your story is valued here?

Shabana: Yes, yes. There is so much...that surprised us at first, but we are satisfied. It is hard. Everything is expensive and we have to work hard, but we are heard and welcomed.

Shabana then goes on to describe the terrible conditions that her family, and many other refugee families, endured in her first country of resettlement. With six people living in a single room, no financial assistance from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and a strict prohibition on employment, Shabana and her family described themselves as prisoners, starved and forced into dangerous menial labor. In order to earn any money, Shabana and other refugees would have to duck curfew and take work with employers who paid bribes to authorities. These employers would then often say to their refugee employees “I have to pay the bribe, so I have no money to pay you.” This cycle essentially resulted in Shabana, and others like her, to become forced laborers within a corrupt system.

Despite this horrific situation, Shabana glows with pride as she tells me about the ways in which they resisted their circumstances. “We made [athletic] competitions for the children,” she said. “We held poetry contests, we discussed politics, we shared food. We worked together because it was how we keep our mental health.” Much like Rosette, Shabana shares her narrative in ways that resists common tragedy tropes. Rather than dwelling on the hardships she and her family have endured, she emphasizes their resilience.

When I ask Shabana what structures could be missing to support her and her family, she pauses. “Our main support after God is [the local resettlement agency],” she says looking to her son. “Without them, we could not go to the doctor.”

Researcher: “But...?” I ask, “is there anything that we have missed that you have noticed?” It is here that I am working hard to avoid leading her to an answer. I do not ask Shabana about sexual health or education. In my observations it seems that (much like the resettlement staff) many refugees cannot ask for what they do not know is available. Not only are they maneuvering through an entirely foreign culture, language, and landscape, but they cannot predict what they may or may not need. They cannot know that something is missing until it is missed.

Shabana: Well...I only wish that [the resettlement agency] could support us for at least six months instead of three. In our culture, we support ourselves. We do not like to beg or ask for help. Instead, our God calls us to help others. If you have something you give to another. I would prefer that, when we can survive ourselves that we say, ‘Thank you - please give that money to others who need it.’ We are not mentally prepared to survive the challenge in America — no money, new life, new culture — after three months. Our house is much, much too expensive. Depression is very serious in this time, and it is overwhelming to pay the bills ourselves.

Shabana goes on to further emphasize her appreciation of the Cultural Orientation Class' (fairly new) emphasis on mental health. It is important to observe that, while this local resettlement agency is limited in their ability and services, it is the larger humanitarian structures that have failed to fully support refugees like Shabana's family. It is the limited federal funding for resettlement that prevents Shabana from having six months of support instead of three, while her family finds their feet. It is the limited and broken U.S. healthcare system that strains her family's budget and it is the stagnant minimum wage that causes them, and millions of others, to barely scrape by. Shabana's story reveals this and more, and the impact of her narrative lies in its witnessing to the realities of a larger resettlement system: the good and the bad.

Discussion

Of the many themes emerging from this study, it is Shabana and Rosette's willingness to have their stories heard that most contradicts the dominant narrative of refugee women being primarily reticent and silent. While certainly it can be argued that Shabana and Rosette possess a certain level of empowerment through their language skill, and that there are many refugee women who have no desire to share their experiences with others, it is not because of a refugee woman's gender that they are "silent." Rather, this silence appears to be a result of the societal, resettlement, and support structures that exist in the United States, and the systemic absence of women's spaces. It is not that refugee women have no desire to speak, it is that they are systematically silenced by a larger resettlement system. While refugee agencies may value the experiences and narratives of their refugee clientele, it is my observation that the larger United States bureaucracy does not appear to. Rather, women's narratives and needs have long been unheard and unmet in the United States, and this is true not just for refugee women, but for all women within the States.

This insight leads into another central theme that emerges from these narratives, which is that of the *unheard narrative*. This concept can be seen in Pauline's narrative as she discusses the potential challenges in broaching difficult topics in the Women's Support Group: "If someone is talking about a trauma or if their husband is — they want to feel comfortable." In this short silence following the mention of the husband, Pauline and I both understand that she is alluding to domestic violence. While this topic is never explicitly stated, not even within the context of the interview, the silence in Pauline's narrative tells me precisely what she means. Another example of this unspoken narrative lies in Sarah's story of the five pregnant refugee women and how "...we have no idea how most of these [refugee] women think about.... We don't know what they want...". The silence punctuating Sarah's narrative again alludes to another culturally difficult topic: sex, sex education, pregnancy, and contraception. Sarah later elaborates that conversations surrounding sexual health are uncomfortable for both refugees and resettlement staff and that, while resettlement staff acknowledge the importance of addressing these concerns, they are trapped in "a stalemate". Unable to identify how to broach these difficult topics, the narratives of refugee women are heard and yet remain unaddressed, with resettlement staff largely unable to be fully responsive to the needs revealed within those narratives.

These counter and unheard narratives should also be understood within the larger American context, where the dominant narrative, seen in popular media and evidenced in both federal and state law, indicates that refugees, and refugee women, are vulnerable at best and criminals at worst. Rather than being seen as new members of the U.S. population and — on a local scale — the community, refugees are often treated as an *outside* group that requires special resources and care, with the narratives of refugee women somehow remaining separate from the narratives of other women within the community (Freire, 1979; Scribner, 2017).

I admit, prior to the completion of this study, my aim was to provide some level of insight and to identify avenues of access that may have been currently unidentified for encouraging refugee women to share their narratives. However, as I continued to work with both refugee participants and resettlement staff, it became very evident that this focus was flawed. What I discovered was that the diminution and ignorance of refugee women's experiences had nothing to do with any specific resettlement class or programming, but rather with the larger political and cultural structures in play. More bluntly, the devaluing of refugee women's narratives is not solely a refugee issue, but instead a cultural issue that impacts all women, from all backgrounds, within the United States (Barnes, 2004; Scribner, 2017; Asaf, 2017).

Further, I learned that many well-intentioned individuals, including myself, approach resettlement with the question of how do we meet *their needs*? What can we do for *this population*? However, this approach is founded on the concept that refugees, and refugee women, are somehow inherently separate from the community. Rather, the question is, why are we not addressing the larger structural issues (such as healthcare and women's rights) within the United States that greatly impact the entire community? Refugees and refugee women are a *part of the community*, and addressing the community's needs is to also address the needs of refugee women.

This realization became most apparent to me as staff articulated the need to create their own resources for refugee women rather than being able to refer their clients to established resources within the community. Resettlement agencies range in their staff size, funding, and approach, but what proved consistent for this agency was the absence of stable support structures for refugees, including established spaces for refugee women. As demonstrated by the narratives gathered, these supports and spaces are absent because they are neither funded nor prioritized by

federal, state, or resettlement leadership. As Sarah briefly quipped during the final moments of our interview: "...the space for integration and orientation is not...there. At least, not in the bureaucratic sense. From the community, it's there, especially here [locally]... [But still] there's not really support for the model that we're doing."

Further, the refugee women I have spoken with are sharing narratives that indicate a willingness to address their challenges and open up conversations surrounding their specific experiences and needs. However, their narratives are not entirely unique to their refugee status, and much could be gained by placing their challenges within the context of resource gaps within the community. Refugee women do not have ready support groups because the structures needed to build these spaces and literacies crucial to welcoming these women's narratives are underfunded or absent in the United States. If these structures exist (such as mental and sexual healthcare clinics), they cannot be accessed without first clearing certain procedural barriers or reaching a certain level of economic stability (Asaf, 2017). The needs of refugee women are the needs of all women within the community who deserve to have their narratives sought out, witnessed, and valued. It is for this precise reason that refugee women's counter narratives are crucial as they serve to confront and negate the language that so often undermines those narratives' validity. Examples of commonality in such counter narratives can be seen as both of the refugee women interviewed in this study discuss their concerns about family, health, safety, stability, and work. "There are a lot of problems in [home country]," Rosette says, reflecting on her resettlement to the United States. "In [my country], there is no job. There life is very bad. There is no money to pay school fees, our children are very poor because there is no job there for them." Reflected in Rosette's narrative, there are the many of the same concerns low-income women have within the United States: Where will I find work, and how will I care for my

family? Further, within both her and Shabana's narratives, we see a determination and resiliency that contradicts a dominant narrative within the U.S. of refugee women's fragility and vulnerability. "In [our first resettlement country], we were always weeping because we left our family in a bad situation," Shabana told me while watching her son play in his wheelchair. "We traveled for many days - I carried my son. We left our whole community, our businesses, our careers, our blood. [...] Thanks God, with time, we were able to solve our problems, but it is very tough." While I hold some concerns over both women's tendency for sharing their stories of "overcoming," I think it is undeniable that both narratives exhibit extraordinary strength and insight into the women who share them. As Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) so succinctly argue, refugee women are "more than victims", but they are also "more than survivors". "It is the capacity to transform their lives," Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) state, "[...that is the] dynamic process of shifting, changing, building, learning and moving on from those violent histories to 'establish meaningful lives' now and in the future".

Thus, rather than suggesting that refugee women's experiences and needs are somehow separate from the community's, let's instead argue that they are part of the community's overall narrative and can instead serve to provide context to political issues, policy, and public matters. When space is created to welcome, forefront, and emphasize these counter narratives, that space serves to contradict a dominant narrative of women's docility, fragility, and disenfranchisement. As clearly argued by Paulo Freire (1971) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The truth is, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not people living "outside" society. They have always been "inside" — inside the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves" (p. 55).

Turning back again to the local context of the Central Virginia resettlement organization, the implementation of Trump's travel ban and the collapse of the agency's Women's Support Group dramatically reduced the number of potential participants for this study and thus also reduced the number of women whose stories would be shared. Instead of having over a dozen participants, I was only able to connect with — during this study's given timespan — two refugee women who possessed some fluency in English. True to Pauline's earlier observation, gaining access to these narratives was dependent on the participant's language skill. Without having some level of English education, sharing a narrative with others in a foreign language is overwhelming and intimidating. For this exact reason, having access to female interpreters is crucial to the reception of narratives from refugee women who span a diversity of educational, lingual, and cultural backgrounds. Without the dedicated space and interpreter support, English proves to be both the gateway and barrier to the reception of those narratives.

Along with a loss of ready participants, I also lost access to the interpreters who were to be hired for the Women's Support Group. As a result, I was forced to lean on the goodwill and friendship of an interpreter I met during my time at the Cultural Orientation Class. And, rather than having these conversations within a neutral space and away from the participant's family, these interviews were held at the participant's home. Without ready access to female interpreters and without a protected space for these conversations, the diversity and depth of the narratives able to be received was drastically limited. It is possible that within a protected space and without an interpreter the narratives shared by refugee women might turn away from their chosen "overcoming" narrative, focusing primarily on how they overcame the challenges of resettlement, and instead raise other, conflicted, unspoken, and messier narratives. That is not to say that Rosette and Shabana's chosen narrative was somehow disingenuous. Rather, I argue that

by establishing a space that welcomes and adapts to the concerns of their refugee audience, resettlement agencies may be better able to encourage and embrace the messy and complicated challenges that occur during integration within a new community. As Pauline suggests, “we’re two worlds apart, but women are the same.” Within a dedicated space, with other women who have undergone the experience of resettlement, this sharing of narrative could aid refugee women in overcoming feelings of “invisibility,” participating within their larger community, and encouraging others to step forward and speak out.

With these points in mind, one can easily see why — to quote Sarah — “We have no idea how most [refugee] women think...We don’t know what they want, we don’t know what they will use, we don’t know what they know how to use”. This statement proves particularly significant when considering the continual presence of the unspoken narrative. This unspoken narrative exists in the subtext of each interview, living mostly in the pauses and silences within the overall conversation. Within these pauses were matters dealing with sex education, family planning, abuse, trauma, and mental health, making these silences just as powerful as other speech acts since silence “as a rhetoric, ...[is] a constellation of symbolic strategies that (like spoken language)...serves many functions” (Glenn, 1997, p. xii). Welcoming both narratives, the spoken and unspoken, and creating/identifying spaces within the community to have these conversations is crucial to empowering refugee women to share their experiences and counter limited, albeit dominant narratives.

Recommendations and Implications

During the course of this study, it became evident that scant resources are truly invested into the integration and care of refugees at the federal level. This neglect cannot be laid only at the feet of the resettlement staffers, who are often overwhelmed with day-to-day functions, but rather stems

directly from the lack of prioritization by federal leadership in improving social services and health care access for all at-risk citizens, including refugees (Barnes, 2004; Asaf, 2017). This leadership is particularly lacking when it comes to the prickly issues of gender, sex, race, and family. As noted by Barnes (2004), “The risk of not receiving adequate reproductive health care is higher among newly arrived refugee women compared to nonrefugee women in the United States. For refugee women to enjoy optimum health, their individual needs and health care system issues must be addressed”. Further, as I conducted research at this Central Virginia resettlement agency, resettlement staff often expressed that they felt alone in addressing the changing priorities of their refugee demographic. It is my recommendation that by seeking more refugee women’s narratives, and by further empowering refugee women to share their stories on both a national and local scale, leadership may find themselves increasingly answerable to that community. Much of the current resettlement power structure works to deny the voices and experiences of refugee women through the denial of their validity or through a dominant narrative of refugee women as vulnerable victims, pervasive within popular media and political discourse. It is my observation that these refugee women’s strong desire to be heard further emphasizes how prevalent this silencing of women’s voices is within refugee resettlement. Should these voices be forefronted and heard by leadership at all levels, Freire’s suggestion of a “transformation” of the societal structure that allows people to become “beings for themselves” may be achieved.

An example of where this valuing and recognition of refugee women’s experiences within leadership could come into play lies in the recurring story of the five pregnant refugee women within both Pauline and Sarah’s narrative. The narratives of these five pregnant women were a catalyst that pushed resettlement staff to recognize the importance of health, sex, and

pregnancy education for refugee women and instigated a shift in the ICO course. However, without guidance from national headquarters, the local staff remained at a “stalemate.” “Some people [in the local agency] feel like it’s disrespectful to bring it up too directly,” Sarah observed. “Like, in our initial intake for example, to tell people that here are the options available if you want information.... So, navigating those different opinions [is difficult]. I think we are in a stalemate partly because we have no directive from the office right now to make a decision.” Without this directive from leadership, well-meaning but overworked resettlement staffers instead opt to sidestep the issues that they cannot practically or immediately address. Without guidance and financial backing from leadership, significant issues and needs identified within the narratives of refugee women are unable to be prioritized and remain absent within daily resettlement operations. This avoidance by resettlement staff is a direct example of women’s issues and experiences being ignored or ‘silenced’ within refugee resettlement. By avoiding, ignoring, or otherwise setting aside refugee women’s issues, they become a non-priority. This silencing is then perpetuated by cultural and lingual isolation, where women who may be searching for information on health and family planning find themselves unable to identify that resource. As Sarah summarizes, “some people [refugee women] have asked for that information [on sexual health and family planning], but I just have not been able to be connected to any meaningful services...and, now...like, that’s not what anybody wanted [referring to pregnancy within weeks or months of arriving in a new country].”

Cabot (2016) warned that programs built to receive the narratives of refugees by advocates are “inherently limited” (p. 19) if not constructed to adapt to their audience. These adaptive programs require top-down leadership in order to remain stable, but must avoid bureaucratic rigidity if they are to accommodate bottom-up adaptation to local context. The

structures needed to support and encourage the sharing of narratives by refugee women are both physical and political, requiring both literal space and bureaucratic emphasis, discussion, and valuing. Without federal and organizational leadership, resettlement staff are limited in their ability to shape the spaces crucial to receiving refugee women narratives. Yet, it is vital that these spaces are created since, as Sarah so succinctly summarized, “without knowing anything about how [refugee women] think about [these issues], how do we make [our services] accessible in a way that is successful?”

For this reason, one must insist that the larger resettlement agencies, state, and federal leadership recognize the voices of refugee women as valid and seize the opportunity to involve them as valuable community agents. They must provide, at a minimum, guidelines to resettlement staff regarding such topics as pregnancy, sex education, LGBTQ+ issues and more, while specifically seeking out refugee women’s voices to develop these guidelines. By prioritizing refugee women’s narratives, resettlement agencies may improve their ability to serve the community and transform the dominant discourses surrounding refugee resettlement and aid. By forefronting the voices and experiences of refugee women, U.S. refugee service programs would validate that knowledge and upend the androcentric tendencies within resettlement that view refugee women as vulnerable and passive victims.

Conclusion

Rosette and Shabana’s narratives are emblematic of women who are resourceful, active, and ready to contribute to their new community. They are “more than victims” and “more than survivors” (Pulvirenti and Mason, 2011, p. 46), and they leverage their stories in ways that contradict that dominant narrative and illustrate the complexity of refugee women’s resettlement

experiences. In Rosette, we see this counter narrative emerge in her determination to drive a car and work, despite the challenges that both present:

Rosette: I was jobless. I was a homemaker. Because in [country] there is no job, so that's...I was a homemaker. I didn't study.

Researcher: So, that is what you are looking forward to is getting all that new experience?

Rosette: Yes. My [plan] is to drive, to get a job, and to make more money so that I can help my family [back home].

Shabana also expresses this strong desire to contribute, indicating that she is already making friends within the community in hopes to share that "Islam is a peaceful religion. They do not need to be afraid of me or my family." These narratives are evidence of some refugee women's willingness, even eagerness, to share their stories, requiring only an audience and platform for their message. As Rosette so eloquently stated, "our stories can help others. So, when you ask the question about our stories, we are free. We are free, and we are open to give the answer." Refugee women's voices are there, they have always been there, we need only to acknowledge them.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Refugee Participants

The following questions were IRB approved and used to conduct this study. For the purposes of this study, participants were refugee women who were resettling within a specific, Central Virginia location. Participants self-identified and were not be coerced into sharing their experiences. Some participants did not speak fluent English and required an interpreter present. No interviews were conducted without an interpreter present and complete understanding and informed consent from all participants. All participants were at least 18 years of age.

1. Where did you resettle from?
2. Were there challenges during your resettlement to/within the U.S.?
3. If yes, what are/were these challenges?

What would have helped to remove or relieve these challenges (if any)?

Who do you talk with about your resettlement experience?

4. How would you like resettlement staff and others to talk with you about your experience (if at all)?
5. What stories do you feel are invited by resettlement staff and others? What stories are not?
6. Are we asking the wrong questions about your experience?
7. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience that we may have missed or have not yet covered?

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Refugee Resettlement Staff

The following questions were IRB approved and used to conduct this study. For the purposes of this study, participants were refugee resettlement staff who were serving in the Central Virginia location. Participants self-identified and were not be coerced into sharing their experiences. No interviews were conducted without complete understanding and informed consent from all participants. All participants were at least 18 years of age.

1. Does narrative have a place within resettlement?
2. Are refugee narratives received during the resettlement process?
3. Where are refugee narratives received during the resettlement process?
4. Are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process?
5. How are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process?