

Spring 2017

The role of refugee women narratives in the U.S. resettlement process

Alys N. Sink
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019>

 Part of the [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sink, Alys N., "The role of refugee women narratives in the U.S. resettlement process" (2017). *Masters Theses*. 523.
<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019/523>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

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

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science in Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication

Department of Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication

May 2017

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Dr. Jen Almjeld

Committee Members/ Readers:

Dr. Angela Crow

Dr. Traci Zimmerman

Dedication

To my Hollins sisters: who remind me each day to lift up my eyes.

Acknowledgements

I extend my deepest gratitude to the refugee women and resettlement staff who shared their stories, their patience, and their sound advice throughout the duration of this project. I'm now - and daily - overwhelmed by your kindness and heart.

Further, this thesis would never have existed without the sheer grace and tenacity of my thesis director, Dr. Jen Almjeld. Jen, you are a force to be reckoned with.

I'm also deeply grateful to my committee: Dr. Angela Crow, Dr. Traci Zimmerman, and (for a brief, but wonderful interim) Dr. Susan Ghiaciuc. I was truly lucky to have such brilliant powerhouses on my team.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my family and friends: Em for pulling me across the finish line; my Mum for her laughter and goofy bear stories; and to my partner, Jon, who endured many late nights and always kept the kettle on. As always, forever and more, thank you.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures	v
Abstract	vi
I. Introduction	1
Literature Review	
Dominant & Counter Narratives	
Listening-Rhetoric	
Feminist Research Theory	
Community-Based Activist Research	
II. Methodology	15
Background of Study	
Data Collection and Analysis	
Research Questions	
Background of Researcher	
Limitations	
III. Cultural Orientation	28
The Value of Narrative	
The Utilization of Narrative	
Refugee Women Narratives	
English Lessons	
Nursery	
IV. Interviews	40
Sarah-Alice, School Liaison & English Language....	
Rosette Kazadi, Resettled from Burundi	
Paige Hinton, Intensive Community Orientation Member at CWS	
Shabana Abidi, Resettled from Pakistan	
Willingness and the Unheard Narrative	
V. Findings.....	57
Female Interpreters	
Prioritization of Women’s Narratives by Leadership	
VI. Conclusion	69
Insights	
Recommendations	
Future Research	
References	78

List of Figures

Figure 1. CWS Mental Health Slide 4 32

Abstract

Within resettlement scholarship, there exists a distinct absence of direct narratives by refugee women about their resettlement experiences within the United States. This absence of voice has even been noted by refugee women representatives during a 2013 UNHCR dialogue stating that: “We call for a model in which the State, the municipalities, NGOs and refugees work together to learn from each other, hear the voices from the grassroots and together develop comprehensive, coordinated and long-term responses” (Speaking for Ourselves: Hearing Refugee Voices, A Journey Towards Empowerment). This study delves into this absence of voice locally, investigating the ways in which refugee women’s narratives are received and utilized within the Harrisonburg Church World Service (CWS) refugee resettlement agency. This ethnographic study includes a six-month observation of the CWS Cultural Orientation class and independent interviews with refugee women and resettlement staff. Utilizing Ernest Stringer’s method of action research and Cheryl Glenn’s Rhetoric of Silence, I argue that refugee women’s narratives are not wholly absent or silent, but rather that they are rarely acknowledged, often devalued, or inadvertently made a non-priority within larger resettlement frameworks and leadership. It is my suggestion that, by working with refugee women, prioritizing their experiences, and creating spaces in which these narratives can emerge, resettlement leadership can better serve our refugee communities. I end with a call to all researchers and community members to aid in the creation of these spaces and the valuing of refugee women’s experiences and narratives. This study is limited because the sample pool was small and the impact and reception of this study cannot be fully measured.

THE ROLE OF REFUGEE WOMEN NARRATIVES

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

January 21st, 2017, at 9:00 am on a Saturday morning, thousands of women and men poured into the streets of Washington, D.C.. The sounds of protest and laughter echoed and rumbled between the many office buildings and museums, rippling and culminating to a near crescendo as it reached the Capitol steps. Bright pink hats and protest signs bobbed among the stream of people while, in the trees, young activists with bullhorns shouted down to the marchers: TELL ME WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE. In a roaring voice, the marchers responded: THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE. On the stage, a few yards from the steps of the Air and Space Museum, indigenous activist Jennifer Kreisberg, from the Tuscarora Nation in North Carolina, silenced the crowd and readied her drum. In her native Iroquois, in a sound that was both mournful and soaring, she sang “The Opening of the Sky”.

This moment held deep significance for all in attendance, not only because it called for action, but because this call relied on the voice of an *other*. This othered voice, from a Native American woman, was one that did not align with the dominant cultural identity associated with power within the United States (e.g. an identity that is usually Western, white and male). These othered voices and the ways in which, specifically, refugee women’s voices resist and contest dominant U.S. narratives are the focus of this study. In truth, the Women’s March on Washington DC serves as a remarkable testament to the power of recognizing women’s voices on a larger platform. Chaired by four

women¹, and organized by many others, the Women's March advocated for and developed a platform of intersectional advocacy and feminism. The March embraced a variety of human-rights issues within its Mission & Vision statement (below), including the rights of immigrants and refugees within the United States:

The rhetoric of the past election cycle has insulted, demonized, and threatened many of us - immigrants of all statuses, Muslims and those of diverse religious faiths, people who identify as LGBTQIA, Native people, Black and Brown people, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual assault - and our communities are hurting and scared. We are confronted with the question of how to move forward in the face of national and international concern and fear (Women's March on Washington, 2017).

This opening statement does well to highlight the tenor of alarm and fear among women, particularly immigrant and refugee women within the United States. At the root of this fear lies the potential loss of voice and agency, both of which were demonstrated by those who marched in Washington. This powerful use of voice within a public space has a long and storied history of amplifying the concerns of marginalized groups and rallying the public into awareness and action. In this space, marginalized voices can rise to provide context to political issues, shape policy, and influence public opinion. However, many women's voices are frequently minimized, even within these spaces and, as a result, tend to be overlooked. One need only examine the backlash surrounding the Women's March to recognize the peculiar and threatening nature of a significant female

¹ Chairs included: Tamika D. Mallory, Carmen Perez, Linda Sarsour, and Bob Bland.

agenda and voice to a dominant patriarchal system: where women are expected to be docile, accepting, and (most importantly) silent.

Literature Review

To delve into this project further, I studied the scholarship and rhetoric surrounding refugee resettlement and integration. During this process, I drew on intersections of theory and literature that embraced dominant and counter narrative theory, listening-rhetoric (as described by Wayne Booth in the *Rhetoric of Rhetoric*), feminist theory, and community-based research. Before situating this study in rhetorical studies via the above-mentioned categories, I will first review literature establishing that refugee women, in particular, are commonly represented and framed within North American public discourse as being ineffectual and/or victimized. These representations do not account for refugee women's sense of self, voice, and agency and often the policy surrounding this particular group is made 'for' them rather than in conversation with them:

Over the last half century feminists and other social justice activists have spent considerable time arguing that the Convention on Refugees, and related refugee policies, have failed to properly take account of many women's experiences of the refugee journey. Applications of the Convention have commonly rendered invisible or insignificant gendered elements of women's refugee experiences, undermining those women's access to their human rights. [...] If women are 'invisible' in legal and policy instruments, it is unlikely that the practical protections that flow from those instruments will properly encompass women's needs (McPherson, 2015, p. 176).

Evidence of this problematic framing within recent policy and research on refugee resettlement exists in the notable absence of the direct narratives of refugees who have resettled within the United States. This disconnect is even noted by the UN Refugee Agency, stating in a 2011 paper that, “the gap between reality and policy raises questions outside of the narrow purview of [migration]; primarily, what is the integration paradigm for the United States? [...]?” (Ott, p. 32). While this paper from the UNHCR goes on to highlight some of their concerns as they relate to refugee and migration policy, it does not, paradoxically, include or reference the direct input of refugees.

A more recent example of this disconnect is cited by Heath Cabot (2016) during her discussion on the European Refugee Advocacy Network (ERAD)’s attempt to address the gap by “foregrounding [refugee] voices and experiences that are most often pushed to the margins” (p. 19). This initiative by ERAD failed, however, as “the programmatic commitment toward fostering direct encounters with ‘refugee voices’ attest[ed] to the growing recognition that the perspectives of [advocates] are inherently limited [...] yet the circumscription of these voices within advocacy circles ma[de] it even more difficult to engage with voices that [did] not cohere with the spaces carved out for them” (p. 19). ERAD’s top-down approach toward engaging these voices failed as they provided a structure that did not include a trusted audience. While one can easily argue that there is power within story, that power can be silenced, re-appropriated, or misrepresented, resulting in simplified “tragedy tropes” that are circulated and shared within a wider audience (e.g. the dominant narratives that refugee women are victims while refugee men are aggressors).

It is important to note that this misrepresentation of voice is not a uniquely gendered problem, yet there is still a distinct invisibility of direct narratives by refugee women on their resettlement experience. In fact, this sort of gendered silencing has been previously noted in our own field (Glenn, 1999; Foss, Foss and Griffin, 2006; Ritchie and Ronald, 2001, etc), with Cheryl Glenn specifically reminding us that 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. Rose Jaji (2015) elaborates on this problematic framing by stating that “there is no single femininity that creates identical experiences among women but a continuum of femininities, the existence of which renders femininity malleable and subject to acceptance, contestation, and negotiation...” (p. 506). 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 frequently denied their own representations of agency.

Dominant & Counter Narratives

In addressing the absence of women refugee voices within the research and general discourse, Kate Smith (2015) points to how “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 refugee's lives"² (p. 462). Smith then goes on to further highlight the ways in which women refugees are often represented in policy, discourse, and media as vulnerable and at risk. She argues that seeking the direct narratives of women refugees serves to disrupt this "dominant narrative" and engenders a form of resistance that results in a "counter narrative". Caroline Lenette et al. (2015) further illustrates this point by stating, "...counter-narratives can provide a critical lens to reveal enabling processes often overlooked in dominant discourses" (p. 990). The terms counter and dominant are both terms that I will prudently borrow and use as a means of highlighting instances of narrative resistance.

Listening-Rhetoric

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. This practice of listening includes attention to not only what is said, but also what is also unsaid. Frequently, whenever researchers, policy makers, and advocates strive to uncover these narratives, they are met with silence or resistance. Heath Cabot (2016) remarks on the root of this issue, stating that "...when a [refugee] refuses to engage the representational frameworks that advocates or ethnographers may demand, that voice may become harder to hear and convey; and further, that voice may enter into a space that is not knowable, becoming ghostly within the knowledge practices that seek, yet fail to capture it" (p. 22). When drawing from Wayne Booth's argument of listening-rhetoric, to recognize or 'capture' these voices requires the listener to embrace the possibility of personal change. Leaning on this

² Smith 462

understanding of listening-rhetoric, Wayne Booth (2004) further argues that “listening will be useless unless you let it change your rhetoric” and that “all good rhetoric depends on the rhetor’s *listening to and thinking about the welfare of the audience*, and moderating was is said to meet what has been heard” (pp. 51 & 54). Thus, when we think of what Heath Cabot describes, we can understand that the frameworks built by well-meaning advocates and ethnographers are ineffective if they do not account for the necessity of accommodation and recognition of audience.

However, while seeking female refugee narratives could aid in the contextualization of the experiences of these women, there exists a tension in *who* should share those stories and how they may be gained and shared with a larger audience. That is to say, when confronting a dominant U.S. narrative, there is a desire to counter it with an, assumed, authentic or valid voice. Yet, when we consider how refugee women are seen within this discourse, their experience and knowledge is not what constitutes a valid narrative (within the given framework). This tension is addressed by Alcoff (1991-92) as “a problem of representation” that is “always mediated in complex ways by discourse, power and location” (p. 5). Alcoff continues on to argue three different approaches based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. The approaches are described as “listening to”, “speaking for,” and “speaking to”. She concludes by arguing that there is no perfect solution for the problem of speaking for others, but acknowledges that the speakers must hold themselves, and be held, responsible for their actions within any given context.

Narrative analysis is one method of mediating these complex pathways of

“discourse, power and location” cited by Alcoff, by utilizing counter-narratives to effectively analyze and deconstruct the rhetorical frameworks that surround refugee women and their resettlement experiences. As contended by Caroline Lennette et al. (2015):

Narratives can also come to constitute counter-narratives, often considered as the ‘flip-side’ of established discourses (Bamberg, 2004), which can challenge dominant societal narratives and ‘carry rhetorical weight’ (Garro and Mattingly, 2000, p. 5). [...] Thus, counter-narratives can provide a critical lens to reveal enabling processes often overlooked in dominant discourses (p. 990).

Lennette’s call here is to 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 structures of power that work against these voices, it is crucial to undergo the exercise. Only by seeking to understand the full scope of an experience can we uncover the complex inner workings of that experience.

Feminist Research Theory

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. It is this exact complexity of identity that compels me to draw on feminist theory. In this piece on feminist research in migration, Rachel Silvey (2004) highlights the importance of having feminist researchers conducting work within this field:

Identity was understood to be a shared understanding of a group of people about who they are, whereas feminists emphasize the differences within and between groups that inflect individuals' and groups' identities, and the political implications and importance of these differences and their definitions (Nagel, 2002). Further, rather than seeing identities as fixed definable characteristics of migrants, feminist migration studies have increasingly emphasized the constructed nature of identities, and the ongoing nature of this process (p. 9).

This fluidity of identity and the ways feminist researchers conceptualize that fluidity 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 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).

The importance of applying feminist research theory within this field relies on its understanding of how gender politics influences identity construction and its recognition that 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 lie 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 seeks 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).

To this point, feminist interviewing techniques and analysis enables me as a researcher to embrace narratives that may be otherwise be seen as unconventional or ‘incorrect’, per Lennette’s warning. I am reminded again 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 a similar call to the importance of careful listening. An example of the impact of this approach is given by Marjorie DeVault (1990) during her research on the “Work of Feeding a Family”:

These kinds of comments do not constitute “good quotes” in the conventional sense: they are halting and rather inarticulate, and seem hardly to have any content. Typically, I think, they would be discarded as containing little information about what these women do. I used these women’s words somewhat differently, however: not as straightforward accounts of “what happens,” but as hints toward concerns and activities that are generally unacknowledged. Often, I believe, this halting, hesitant, tentative talk signals the realm of not-quite-articulated experience, where standard vocabulary is inadequate, and where a

respondent tries to speak from experience and finds language wanting. I tried to listen most carefully to this kind of talk (p. 102).

Feminist scholarship and researchers also recognize the narratives of women's lived experiences as relevant data and evidence. Karen and Sonja Foss (1994) outline the following tenets of feminist scholarship:

One is that women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences are taken seriously and valued. The second is that the information gathered about women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences cannot be understood within constructs and theories that were developed without a consideration of women's perspectives. [...] The data of personal experience [...] reveals insights into the impact of the construction of gender on women's lives, their experiences of oppression and of coping with and resisting that oppression..." (p. 39).

Foss & Foss go on to further discuss the challenges that feminist scholars must consider when analyzing and presenting the narratives that have been shared. They suggest that through "constant dialogue, negotiation, and critical reflection" can "researchers seek understanding of the participant's positions" (p. 41). This understanding is further affirmed by seeking confirmation of the researcher's interpretations by participants, a concept that is further emphasized in community research theory.

Although efforts have been made within both academia and international politics to rectify this gap in knowledge about refugee women's resettlement experience (notably, the formation of the UN Entity *UN Women* in 2010 to specifically address gender

inequality globally³), there is still much to learn about the lived experiences of refugee women. As nearly half of all refugees are women (UNHCR⁴), this absence of voice is both concerning and problematic as it encourages a narrow view of the female refugee experience and excludes vital primary information about the challenges implicit within that experience. As evidenced by this gap, there is clearly room for careful listening and an urgent need to seek the narratives of refugee women.

Community-Based Activist Research

When conducting this study and interview, I worked to utilize a number of insights and approaches that exist within community-based research literature. In particular, I sought to channel Ernest Stringer's (2007) method of seeking a "fundamentally consensual approach to inquiry" (p. 16). This consensual approach meant ensuring that the refugee women I interviewed were willing to undertake such a project collaboratively and that they felt empowered to continuously shape and direct the research. Ideally, this approach works to, not only produce new knowledge or theory, but further illuminate an issue and provide insights that can later be acted upon as a community. This approach is particularly effective in building solutions through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders including both the researcher and participants. This action in itself became activism, wherein the seeking out and amplification of refugee women's voices became a means of resistance against current political structures.

It is difficult to overlook the kairotic moment this project lives in. While the exigence of this research began in late 2015, the project underwent drastic changes in

³ According to *UN Women*, the formation of this group stems from "the serious challenges [the UN has faced in its efforts to promote gender equality globally, including inadequate funding and no single recognized driver to direct UN activities on gender equality issues."

⁴ Women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced, or stateless population.

light of the political chaos surrounding the Women's March and the refugee ban enacted by Donald Trump on January 27th, 2017. In the weeks that followed, the refugee resettlement center within Harrisonburg (and 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 countries⁵, resettlement agencies lost crucial funding necessary for daily operations and ongoing backing for refugees already within the United States. Upon writing this piece, Church World Service in Harrisonburg, VA posted a public appeal to the community asking for donations, and benefit lunches and dinners have been scheduled by grassroots organizations in an attempt to rescue resettlement operations. These changes greatly impacted the research approach for this study, as I will more deeply discuss in Chapter Two.

However, despite the chaotic nature of the current administration and challenges to the project at that time, I felt that it was absolutely necessary to push ahead with this project. Now, more than ever, we need to hear the voices of those affected by the 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. As argued by Paul Freire (1971), "who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?" (p. 29). With this political background in mind, I aim to present an appropriate activist study that draws on the prior work of activist researchers both within, and at the intersections of, the field of rhetoric.

In the next chapter, I will outline my own methods for listening to the narratives

⁵ The countries impacted are Iran, Iraq, Syria, Sudan, Libya, Yemen and Somalia.

of refugee women who have resettled within Harrisonburg, VA. In line with feminist research theory, the following chapters will then explore the contexts within which these narratives are received, the voices and stories of a few refugee women who have resettled within this context, and the implications of this research along with recommendations for future investigations.

CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Background of Study

This project proposes a first step towards inviting more refugee narratives into this and other – scholarly and political – discussions. To that end, this study includes ethnographic observations and interviews with both staff and refugee women within the Harrisonburg Immigration and Refugee office, Church World Service (CWS). The refugee community in Harrisonburg, VA is an ideal location for such research as it is a designated resettlement area with a diverse refugee community. CWS has resettled refugees from 22 different countries⁶ since 1988. Because of this long history and diversity, there existed a unique opportunity to conduct a case study in collaboration with CWS that encompassed a wide range of refugee women’s resettlement narratives as well as the literacy training offered to refugees in this specific location that may or may not encourage such narratives. This study was also timely, as recent political tensions surrounding refugee resettlement began to spike (particularly as the highly controversial “Refugee Ban” was enacted by Donald Trump on January 28th, 2017) and the Harrisonburg community organized to welcome and protect new arrivals through various grassroots efforts⁷.

The research for this project was centered on two primary programs provided by the Church World Service (CWS) in Harrisonburg with attention to how participant

⁶ Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia, Burma, Colombia, Congo (Kinshasa), Croatia, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

⁷ Rocktown Rallies is one such effort. This organization was formed in 2015 to support incoming refugees and counter the hostile rhetoric surrounding them.

narratives were, or were not, encouraged by each program. The first program was the Cultural Orientation (CO) class with its top-down approach toward integration and knowledge acquisition. This two-hour orientation met three times weekly and was designed to cover a “mix of ESL and cultural orientation topics which are required for all [new arrivals]. . . . topics like housing and health, education, finances, jobs, and more” (CWS, “Integration Assistance”, n.d.). The first half of the orientation addressed these practical concerns while the second half of the course provided an English Language (EL) tutoring session with volunteer instructors from the community. During this section, volunteers (often from the community or students at James Madison University) would serve as language partners or provide childcare while refugee parents studied. These skills, both practical and lingual, are essential for integration within the United States and within the Harrisonburg community specifically. Having access to these literacies enables refugees to meet the daily challenges of life within the U.S., whether that is reading a phone bill, calling 911, signing a lease, or getting a library card.

As a feminist, activist researcher, I’m committed to carrying out research that not only benefits me - via the completion of this thesis as a requirement for my Masters - but also directly benefits the participants of my study. Further, my positionality as a white, cis-gendered woman pushes me to continually look inward and question my role as a researcher. In this study, I use positionality to mean that my own subjective experiences shape the way in which I engage with others, create questions, and interpret data. It is also this emphasis on positionality that forces me to acknowledge the limits on my objectivity within this research, and recognize the reciprocal nature of this project. Although I was conducting research within the resettlement agency, I was also a

volunteer there and developed many relationships with both the refugees and CWS staff. It was deeply important to me to be actively engaged as a volunteer at the site and, for that reason, I began to regularly volunteer with the CO class in early 2016. When I began my research, I took care to carefully observe each class in order to understand how the program operated, prioritized needs, and evolved with their participants. While I have not included direct field note observations within this study, these observations and experiences have informed my research when working to understand how certain narratives, literacies, and skills were privileged within the resettlement agency's orientation structure. I also gathered all texts used for and during the class (slideshows, English language worksheets, job applications, etc.) for deeper reading and analysis. All insights from these observations will be shared in Chapter Three.

The second program studied was a Women's Support Group which (previously) exemplified a hybrid approach toward community building and storytelling. I use the term "hybrid" when describing this group, as it was a grant funded (top-down structure) but community organized (bottom-up) initiative. At the start of this study, the Women's Group was an established initiative and met twice monthly to discuss a variety of unifying topics such as health care, schooling, and exercise. However, upon the start of the Trump administration, the grant funding for this group dissipated and much of the CWS framework remained in limbo. However, an AmeriCorps intern within the resettlement center anticipated this possibility and allied with others within the community to restart the support group. This intern later approached me asking if I could provide additional insight from my training with the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN) when structuring this group. As a feminist, activist, and researcher, I

struggled to decide whether my participation would aid or hinder that process. However, it is my strong belief that research demands participation, and I agreed to help.

Because of the disbanding of the women's group, the research gathered for this chapter consists of participant interviews with refugee women who expressed interest in the group (and this study). As a volunteer, I had, to that point, been able to introduce myself to members of the community and establish relationships with many of the women who joined the CO class. These relationships served to deepen and ground my understanding of the space these women inhabited and served as the basis for thick description included within the research. While data from such a case study does not provide generalizable findings, it is my hope that the data collected and 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.

Data Collection and Analysis

When volunteering and conducting research within CWS, I practiced full transparency and informed participants about my research, often with the aid of a CWS interpreter. As a participant observer within the Cultural Orientation (CO) Class, I maintained field notes, but these notes included no identifiers and were not used within the study. The field notes were only intended to enrich my general understanding of the center's programming. When conducting interviews, I approached a member of the staff to help inform participants about the study and invite anyone who was interested to self-identify. Participants were not expected to respond immediately and were given both time

and space apart from myself and the CWS staff to decide. Once a participant self-identified, I met with that participant, along with a CWS interpreter, to discuss the study's purpose and the consent forms. Participants were also informed of the intention to audio record prior to the interview and within the consent form. All interviews were conducted individually and at a location of the participant's choosing. I did not record a participant unless I was given express consent by that participant. The participants were informed of their ability to decline at any time and without repercussion. If and when a declination was given, the participant was removed from the study and their prior information and/or responses were not used. Participants were informed that any identifying information would be destroyed upon conclusion of the study and that their interactions and responses would not be shared with anyone besides the researcher and the study's audience.

All participants were given pseudonyms for the duration of the study in order to protect their identity (this includes both the refugee participants and staff). All interviews were recorded on a portable, Zoom H1 digital audio recorder that I owned. The digital audio recordings were encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer in my home office, and MEO Encryption Software was used to encrypt the audio files. Broad notes from the interview were also stored in my home office along with a master list of names and pseudonyms. This information was kept in a locked desk drawer in my office, and was kept separate from other documents. Upon completion of the study, the broad notes and digital audio recordings were destroyed and deleted, and all consent forms were stored in a sealed folder and locked in a file cabinet within my home office.

There was no more than minimal risk expected from participation, that is, risk associated with everyday activity. The potential benefits of this research were that this project provided a platform for participants to share their narratives in a safe but public manner. This benefit especially extended to the participants within this case study, since these individuals had expressed an interest and desire to have their story heard (with the added protection of confidentiality and anonymity, should they so choose). There was also a potential benefit for the resettlement agency, as I would share relevant findings that could impact their programming and/or services.

The data collected was transcribed and analyzed using a grounded theory research method. I used a grounded theory approach and inductive coding to analyze data for recurring ideas, concepts, and questions emerging from interview data.

Research Questions

Below are the research questions that guided this study. Interviews with participants were semi-structured in order to remain responsive to the emergent nature of the study, and no questions about illegal activity were asked.

1. How are narratives valued in local refugee resettlement agencies, specifically in the Harrisonburg resettlement agency?
2. Are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process? If so, how are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process?
3. What structures might be needed to support the sharing of narratives from refugee women? How may we encourage refugee women to construct and share their narratives?

For the purposes of this study, all participants were refugee women and resettlement staff within the Harrisonburg, CWS network. The four participants who provided interviews self-identified as wanting to participate and were not coerced by myself or resettlement staff, and I strove to provide full explanations about the study before gaining informed consent. All the participants in this study were over 18 years of age, came from varied backgrounds and languages, and shared their narratives in the presence of a CWS interpreter. All CWS interpreters are trained by CWS and aware of the vulnerable nature of this population and the need to respect personhood and maintain client confidentiality. Additionally, a CWS Health Liaison was on hand to aid the participant should they re-experience any trauma when sharing their narrative during the interview process.

Background of Researcher

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 thrust into a community of which I had previously been unaware. The refugee center was severely understaffed, having lost two employees within the first month I started. 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. As a result, I began to appreciate the importance of careful listening and seeking the narratives of those we work with. So often, we tend to overlook our own ability to connect with

others when that connection is precisely the space where the greatest insight and growth can be found. This appreciation only grew as I continued to volunteer with various resettlement and education agencies (namely Refugee Immigration Services (RIS) in Charlottesville, VA and Alliance for International Women's Rights (AIWR)).

As a volunteer with the Church World Service (CWS) in Harrisonburg during this study, I often found myself uncomfortably caught between the roles of volunteer and researcher. While one role required service, the other insisted that I explore and interrogate. Like researcher Nancy Deutsch (2004) describing her work in an urban youth center, I was aware that as a white, college educated, cis-gendered, American woman, there are perceived positions of power that I represent. 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. While I would argue that there is evidence to demonstrate the power of story, the ownership and impact of that story wholly depends on the narrator and their audience. To best summarize this point, I turn to this short segment from Lenette et. al (2015):

...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 community-based research defined by Walton et. al. (2014), it was this ability for choice that I prioritized, seeking to "enable [my participants] with how they might choose to participate" (p. 53). While this capacity for choice may seem obvious or common sense, I'd like to place this approach within context and highlight an incident that occurred during one of the Culture Orientation classes.

During this class, a young male student (known as Daniel in this study) entered the room unannounced and sat near the back. As many students from the local university tend to volunteer with the Center, his presence was not unusual, although he did remain disengaged from the rest of the refugees and volunteers. However, when the class ended and everyone stood for a brief break, the student opened his backpack and began setting up a video camera. The presence of the camera immediately made many of the refugees nervous, and this anxiety only increased as Daniel began asking for "a refugee to answer interview questions". I spoke with the lead volunteer who assured me that this student had permission to film; however, it was clear to me that none of the refugee participants had provided their prior consent. The student eventually approached the lead volunteer and asked who he should interview. The lead volunteer couldn't answer and struggled to communicate his request to the group as many of the interpreters had left following the end of the orientation. Eventually, however, Farshad⁸ agreed to be interviewed, but it was clear that he was doing so to remove the pressure from his peers. Daniel mic'd up his participant, placed Farshad in front of the camera, asked him two questions, shook his hand, and then left. That student never returned to the orientation again nor did he share

⁸ This man's name has been changed to protect his privacy.

his material with the participant upon its completion. At that time, Farshad and his family had been in the United States for barely one week, and this was their first CO class.

Daniel completed his assignment for the course, but what had he left behind?

It is with these exact tensions in mind that I decided to utilize feminist methodologies of reflexivity and positionality. As emphasized by Lekkie Hopkins (2009), the “ways to dismantle the notion of power-over research participants wielded by the researcher, [is] to attend instead to ways to work collaboratively, collegially and in an egalitarian manner with research participants” (p. 138). Hopkins also goes on to say that positionality should be the focus of research rather than on the answers received during narrative inquiry. With this methodology in mind, I sought to work *with* participants rather than *for* them and aimed to share narratives that were wholly consensual, individual, and a source of pride for the participant. In short, I didn’t want to exact the harm that Daniel (likely inadvertently) exacted on Farshad by removing his power of choice and agency.

Limitations

There are a few limitations of this study that I feel are important to address. First, we cannot overlook the vital role language plays in sharing and receiving narratives. All conversations with refugee women within this study were with the aid of a CWS interpreter. These interpreters come from a variety of backgrounds, some having been refugees themselves or volunteers with advanced language skills. As a result, there is no guarantee that any translated narrative accurately or fully reflects the lived experiences shared by these participants. Much like story-telling itself, language is hard to pin down and leaves plenty open to interpretation, questioning, and curiosity. As noted by Temple,

Bogusia, and Rhetta Moran (2006) in their book *Doing Research with Refugees: Issues and Guidelines*:

Language is an important part of conceptualization, incorporating values and beliefs, not just a tool or technical label for conveying concepts. It carries accumulated and particular cultural, social and political meanings that cannot simply be read off through the process of translation, and organizes and prepares the experience of its speakers. [...] Language can define difference and commonality; exclude or include others; it is not a neutral medium (p. 41).

As I argued earlier, it was my intention to approach these narratives as communal conversations, welcoming the narrative in any way that the participant chose to share it. This community-based approach included ensuring that a translator was available for each discussion, that I maintained full transparency with my participants, and that I composed interview questions that were as direct and clear as possible (given that narrative research will often result in tangents and is rarely direct). While there are inherent issues with conducting narrative research with the aid of a translator, this challenge was somewhat mediated in this case by the personal bond each interpreter had with the participant (and the bond I had with many of those I had worked with previously). The refugee community in Harrisonburg is relatively small, so it was not unusual for the interpreter to be familiar with the participant. Naturally, this personal relationship encouraged a better understanding of meaning between the translator and participant, but it also meant a degree of bias as well. Without an understanding of the language, I was entirely reliant on the interpreter's explanation and judgment and thus my

research is a reflection of that perceived meaning and should not be taken as a perfect record of any participant's narrative or experience.

Second, my cultural understanding of each participant's background was incomplete and limited. I cannot, nor can any researcher, fully contextualize the important cultural and historical elements that underlie another person's narrative. Rather, I have instead attempted to frame these narratives within their present setting in the United States and the ways in which these narratives demonstrate changes in identity, representation, or conflict.

Third, the dataset for this study is small and cannot be considered as generalizable to other settings or groups. Rather, this study aims to explore, celebrate, and encourage the seeking out of refugee women's narratives in an effort to better understand their resettlement experiences and needs. It is my hope that the positive impact of this process might be that the shared narratives of these refugee women are "...[one] way of hearing their voice amidst broader (mostly negative) refugee discourses" (Caroline Lenette et al., 2015, p. 998), particularly within the current social and political climate. This study, then, encourages other scholars to seek out and share narratives from their own locations.

Fourth, and most importantly, there was the question of how to conduct this research ethically, respectfully, and effectively. I did not want to commandeer the voices of the women who shared their stories with me. I did not want to claim ownership over their lived experiences, or to draw my own meaning from their struggles, joys, and insights. I certainly did not want to be Daniel, the journalism student, blindly asking for something I have no right to or understanding of. Instead, as a researcher, it was vital that I remained aware of the tension of ownership and take into account the wishes of my

participants when conducting and compiling my research. Specifically, I decided to follow Hopkin's recommendation for emphasizing positionality and utilize approaches that existed within community-based research literature. In particular, I aimed to channel Ernest Stringer's (2007) method of seeking a "fundamentally consensual approach to inquiry" (p. 16). This consensual approach meant ensuring that all participants were willing to undertake this project collaboratively and that they felt empowered to continuously shape and direct the research. Ideally, this approach works to, not only produce new knowledge, but to further illuminate an issue and provide insights that can later be acted upon as a community. This approach is particularly effective because solutions are built through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders including both the researcher and participants. This method coincides with long-term partnering, as community-based inquiry requires a researcher to establish trust with the community they observe and serve. In Chapters Three and Four I will share the data and interviews gathered during this study. Chapter Five contains my findings based on my own experiences as a researcher working with refugee populations and the many insights from those who participated in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

Cultural Orientation

As summarized earlier in Chapter Two, the Cultural Orientation (CO) Class is the resettlement center's baseline course for all newly-arrived refugees and constitutes a two-hour class held in monthly episodes, three days a week, for four weeks. The course provides a basic literacy on U.S. and community culture, with the first half of the course addressing practical resettlement concerns and the second half providing an English class with volunteers contributing both lessons and temporary childcare. The class is held in a local church in downtown Harrisonburg, VA, a short walk from the Church World Service (CWS) resettlement office. The church is over 200 years old, large, with a lovely red stone structure and stained glass windows. Access to the church is irregular with refugees and volunteers sometimes waiting for church staff to unlock the doors and allow them inside. The room provided for the orientation is on the second floor and is large enough for four long tables and 30+ chairs. During the time of my observations, the class rarely exceeded 20 people. This number remained low primarily because the resettlement office can only accept a limited number of refugees within the year, and these individuals are resettled on a rolling basis. As of the 2016 fiscal year, CWS in Harrisonburg was responsible for the resettlement of 263 refugees (a higher number than average due to the instability of the current administration), with roughly 20 people being resettled each month.

Initially, I began to observe the CO Class in order to better understand the programming at the resettlement agency and increase my preparedness to work with the Women's Support Group in the spring of 2017. Most of, if not all, the members of the

Women's Support Group would have completed the CO Class, and these observations would have provided additional context to the narratives shared by this population.

However, upon the closure of the Women's Support Group, caused by the uncertainty of Donald Trump's refugee ban, the focus of my analysis shifted. I could no longer look at the data as a comparison between two resettlement program/curriculum structures.

Instead, I needed to evaluate the orientation as it stood. I began to study the CO curriculum and observe how it was designed, noting particularly the narratives valued and the narrative spaces made available to refugee women. The CO curriculum was an ideal means of understanding the general resettlement curriculum provided by CWS, as each refugee who is currently resettled within Harrisonburg undergoes this orientation.

I structured my analysis of the CO curriculum around the three research questions from Chapter Two (listed below), utilizing primarily presentation materials to parse the data. The guiding research questions have been shortened into subheadings (The Value of Narrative, The Utilization of Narrative, and Refugee Women Narratives); however, for the reader's convenience, I have included them in full below:

1. How are narratives valued in local refugee resettlement agencies, specifically in the Harrisonburg resettlement agency?
2. Are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process? If so, how are refugee narratives utilized within the resettlement process?
3. What structures might be needed to support the sharing of narratives from refugee women? How may we encourage refugee women to construct and share their narratives?

My observations of the CO Class and curriculum aided in my ability to identify the narratives, literacies, and skills privileged within the resettlement agency's orientation structure. The primary goal (and narrative) of the orientation course is to provide the cultural literacies necessary for daily living in the United States. The CO course emphasizes the importance of self-sufficiency, responsibility, and integration. Limited physical materials were shared. Instead, the majority of classes were given in a lecture style format with refugees receiving information from the CWS representative (who usually followed a PowerPoint) and with the help of an interpreter. This format did not encourage much interaction with participants outside of planned pauses for clarification and questions. However, it is important to note that the interactions within these classes were mostly limited by language barriers rather than a lack of interest or engagement with the topics covered. Further, the Intensive Cultural Orientation (ICO) course was clearly designed to serve all refugees and, for that reason, there exists a tension between the incorporation of personal narrative and generalized experience.

This noted lack of regular interaction is not to say that there were *no* narratives shared. Rather, when reviewing the material, the CWS representative often paused to urge participants to share their personal experiences or feedback with the class. This urging usually resulted in a handful of people sharing their experiences, asking questions, and engaging fully with the material. These conversations initially centered on general topics (such as food, family, health, etc.), but eventually led to deeper discussions in later presentations regarding gender roles, mental health, and religion. Refugee women were often reticent in these early discussions to share their experiences, instead relying on their male partners or relatives to vocalize their thoughts. This reticence is an issue that I

further explore in Chapter Four during interviews with participants and is an aspect that consistently re-emerges throughout the study.

Due to the generalized nature of the CO course, it was evident that the orientation's prioritized narrative centered on practical needs. The needs discussed were: The Role of the Resettlement Agency, Introduction to the ICO course, Housing, Health, Transportation, US Laws, Education, Employment, and Learning English. While each of the courses were a vital part of the curriculum, for the purpose of this study, I have decided to comment on only three specific classes that demonstrated the value, utilization, and accommodation of narrative within resettlement.

The Value of Narrative

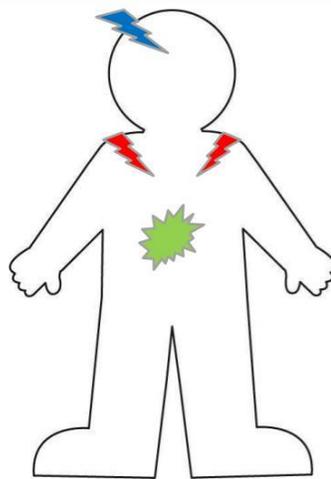
"...Know that you are not alone, and what you feel is a common part of the adjustment process" (Mental Health ICO, Slide 8).

The Health ICO was provided during the second week of the Cultural Orientation cycle and took all three days scheduled for that week. The topics for each class were as follows: General Health and Wellness (e.g. how to schedule an appointment, what to expect during an appointment, etc.), Preventative Health and Wellness (self-care, diet, and exercise, etc.), and Mental Health (handling stress and trauma). Looking specifically at the Mental Health course, there is a significant shift in the priorities put forth by the orientation. Rather than focusing on the daily challenges of the present and future, refugees are instead asked to pause, to take stock of their past, and to look internally. They are asked to occupy this space and recognize the validity of their own experiences with displacement, to consider their personal resettlement narrative.

The class begins by first defining stress and trauma, describing trauma as an extreme evolution of stress brought on by equally extreme events. The discussion then

turns to the concept of physical and emotional wounds, suggesting that mental wounds are just as important as the physical and may also require medical assistance for treatment and healing. This explanation is then followed by an activity where the participant is given the drawing of a cartoon body and asked to draw onto the body wherever they feel stress. Everyone present at the orientation class is required to complete this exercise, including volunteers and CWS staff.

Stress in the Body Activity



Where do you
feel stress?
What does it
feel like?



Figure 1. CWS Mental Health Slide 4.

The CWS representative provides about five minutes for the class to complete this exercise before asking if anyone was willing to share. Depending on the participants, this request was either met with immediate enthusiasm or complete silence. It was this moment that truly demarcated this class from the rest of the orientation. In this space, there was awkwardness, fear, embarrassment, joy, and anxiety - all of which stemmed from this desire or non-desire to be seen and heard in such a public way. In my observation of one course, and perhaps unsurprising to some, a large number of female participants were more engaged during this activity than their male counterparts. I cannot

speculate as to whether this shift is due to differences in emotional intelligence, but it is important to note that - given space - refugee women's narratives can and will surface.

As noted prior, the orientation is tasked with sharing a bevy of difficult information in a short time period and often works to straddle the divide between personal engagement and generalized information distribution. However, there was clearly a value of narrative within the course and this value was shown in classes like the Mental Health class. These courses demonstrated that the ability to receive and share a narrative could begin conversations that were mutually beneficial. During these classes, refugees could realize that they are not alone in their resettlement journey and that they are surrounded by a community who is open to their needs. Alternatively, resettlement staff and volunteers are continuously learning how to better serve the refugee community and adjust their material according to the needs communicated and observed. Thus, creating and protecting these spaces is crucial to initiating and continuing this cycle of reciprocity.

The Utilization of Narrative

"In the US, it is important to treat all people with respect no matter what race, religion, or ethnic group they belong to. Americans consider it very offensive to speak negatively about other groups" (Intro to ICO, Slide 2).

The Introduction to Intensive Cultural Orientation presentation was given on the second day of orientation and provided a quick dive into the cultural differences that refugees may encounter when resettling within the United States. I chose this course to analyze the utilization of narrative because of its deliberate discussion on gender and family roles. These topics were discussed through a series of call-and-response interactions and short scenarios. These scenarios were designed to demonstrate common

challenges that the refugees may encounter when integrating into North American culture and provided recommendations on how participants might meet these challenges. The scenarios were as follows:

- Wabberi, an elderly man who came to the United States to join his family. He is struggling with isolation and a loss of identity. The image for this scenario shows a seated older man with an older woman standing behind him, her arms wrapped around his shoulders.
- Arjun and Rupali, a husband and wife duo. The narrative discusses Rupali's emerging self-confidence in her new responsibilities as the breadwinner, while the crux of the scenario centers on Arjun's discomfort over the growing independence of his wife. The narrative for Rupali indicates that she no longer cooks as much as before and that she "was feeling more confident and enjoying her new responsibilities". The image shows a young woman changing the sheets of a hotel bed.
- Family Roles: In this slide, we shift to a soft overview of domestic violence and child abuse. The slide briefly explains both forms of abuse, indicating that "in the US it is a crime for a husband to hurt his wife or vice versa" and that "physical discipline of children is discouraged in the US and is not considered very effective". The images used for this slide depicts a close-up of a man's fist with a woman curled into a corner in the background and the face of a crying young child.
- Julianna, a teenage girl who asks to go to the mall with her friends. Julianna is about to leave the house when her parent sees that she is wearing a short skirt.

The parent struggles to decide how to appropriately respond. The image is of a smiling young woman wearing a black pencil skirt that is just above the knee.

- Cardel, a teenage boy who wants to go to a party at a friend's house with some of his teammates from the high school football team. The parent agrees only to find out from a neighbor that there might be alcohol at this party. The parent struggles to decide how to appropriately respond. The image is of a smiling young man's face.

In each of these scenarios, the refugees attending the course are asked to choose from a set of possible solutions or to proffer their own. While it should be noted that each of these scenarios *could* happen and that they are likely gleaned from common struggles shared by refugees with resettlement center staff, each scenario does pull on common tropes. These tropes are common within the larger North American dominant narratives surrounding refugees and their experiences within the United States. We have the grandfather who is emotionally isolated, unable or unwilling to connect with others who deviate from his expectations and/or culture. There is the independent wife whose story of growth serves only as the catalyst to her husband's struggle. There are the images of male violence juxtaposed with depictions of female fragility. Finally, there exists the concern over how one gender dresses versus how one gender may consume alcohol and break the law. It is inaccurate to say that these stereotypes are untrue; certainly, these narratives exist and are valid. Tropes and stereotypes enable a quick understanding of different people and places, and narrative tropes enable that level of access within a much larger discussion about femininity, masculinity and vulnerability. Still, narrative tropes are limited and unable to represent the full scope of human experience. Just as there are

narratives of grandfathers who battle loneliness or men who struggle with new cultural roles, there exist narratives of grandmothers battling isolation, women embracing their own agency, mother's maintaining a violence-free home, and daughters combating peer pressure. Thus, while tropes are useful shorthand for appealing to a larger audience, one mustn't forget the power narrative holds within the resettlement process, often impacting both the priorities and power structures enacted within that process. A story (or in this case narrative) is told often enough, it can become truth (or, in our case, resettlement policy).

Refugee Women Narratives

“Our caseworkers are not your friends, they will not take you out to coffee or treat you special” (Role of the Resettlement Agency ICO, Slide 4).

The quote “we are not your friends” appears harsh on its face but serves to set clear expectations between CWS staff and refugees. Primarily that, resettlement staff are unable to treat each refugee and refugee family with special consideration and that staff want/need their clientele to build relationships within the community in order to continue thriving. This message was communicated throughout the entire orientation course but often seemed to conflict with the desires and attitudes of the individuals providing support during the course. This message, along with the physical space of the church and nursery, set a difficult boundary for refugees and refugee women to overcome when sharing their lived experiences. What I argue below is that, while the CO course, language classes, and nursery are all valuable assets and spaces to the resettlement process, they cannot serve as substitutes for the support structures necessary to receiving the narratives of refugee women.

When considering the current narrative spaces available to refugee women within this course, there were two spaces where these experiences appeared most forefront. These two spaces were the English language lesson classes and the nursery. As mentioned prior, each CO class was followed by an English lesson taught with the help of community volunteers. These volunteers would serve as language instructors or help in the nursery if needed. The classes were led by a long-standing CWS volunteer with many years of experience in teaching English language learners, and each class would be tailored to address vocabulary and literacy skills related to that day's CO Class topic.

English Lessons

During English lessons, the translators would leave and students would be divided by language ability, which generally meant refugee women would be separated from their relatives, children, and spouses. Students would be paired with a community volunteer, and they would work together through a range of vocabulary, workbooks, and literacy skills. Each student reacted differently to this class and the women's language skills were just as diverse as their experiences. However, there were many moments within this course that demonstrated the powerful importance of hearing women's narratives in order to better serve refugee women as a population.

One such moment frequently occurred during the English classes that followed the Health ICO course. During this week of classes, the volunteer instructor would make a point of separating the women into one group and discussing health and wellness. She would demonstrate the different types of hygiene products including, soap, deodorant, shampoo, tampons and pads. This demonstration revealed that refugee women had different experiences regarding women's health and that they had questions and needs

that were currently unmet. When interviewing CWS staff in Chapter Four, this insight proves to be one of the crucial issues that women's narratives can and do reveal. That federal resources promoting women's health, sexuality, and wellness are deeply politicized, underfunded, and unmet; and, that this complicated network of challenges is often left to smaller resettlement agencies to navigate and address. Further, without providing space for women's narratives to emerge, there is limited insight into this population's needs (specifically, in our case, their own healthcare needs) and a resulting inability to develop support structures around those needs. While the English classes proved an important space to gaining access to those narratives, these classes were not explicitly designed to do so and are instead indications for the need to purposefully create these physical and narrative spaces.

Nursery

I've included the nursery as a space where refugee women's narratives played a role, as this space often enabled refugee parents (and refugee women in particular) the ability to fully participate within the English class. The nursery is also a space culturally marked as female, carrying with it certain connotations and expectations around nursing and motherhood. The nursery is housed just outside the church's classroom and contains a number of toys and Christian children's books. These materials were available for refugee children to use, but volunteers were careful to maintain the space and ensure it was tidy prior to leaving. In many ways, refugee children, and the volunteers who watched them, were seen as temporary guests within the church and were not fully considered "part of" the church. This desire to both welcome and keep apart from the newly arrived refugee population calls back to the difficult divide between the personal

and general narratives sought and given during the resettlement process and who constitutes as the “community”.

While the value of having a nursery available to refugee families is undeniable, it is important to highlight here that the needs of refugee women are often conflated with the needs and issues of refugee children. I argue that, while women’s experiences encompass children, their challenges and needs are not one and the same. Rather, it seems evident that women’s needs and experiences are different from that of children and men, and to conflate the two is to ignore their validity. An example in which women’s needs are often overlooked lies in programs like the Cultural Orientation and English classes. Often, during these group lessons, women are unable to fully participate due to the demands of child rearing. Rather than being able to fully engage with a tutor one-on-one, they are instead pulled into the nursery or attending the needs of their child while still under the instruction of their tutor. This is not to say, of course, that there are not refugee men who face similar struggles. Certainly there are, and it is equally difficult for these parents to gain the full benefit of the class when they are distracted or pulled away. However, it is more often that women are met with this challenge while also operating within varying layers of cultural limitations on education and agency. Thus, not only is childrearing a challenge that delays their ability to gain certain literacies and fully integrate within the community, it is one that could inhibit and hinder that integration entirely. Thus, to conflate the needs of women with the needs and children and men is to ignore the various social and cultural factors that impact their lived experience of resettlement within the United States and perpetuate an imbalanced power structure and dominant narrative of vulnerability.

CHAPTER FOUR

Interviews

In this chapter, I've included a series of four interviews: two with members of the Church World Service (CWS) resettlement staff who regularly participate in the Cultural Orientation (CO) class and two with refugee women who have recently resettled and participated in the CO class. In order to better forefront these narratives and avoid the co-opting of others' voices, I've included large sections of each interview and reserved my analysis for the following chapter.

Each participant was provided the interview questions prior to the interview and was given time to consider their feedback. 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. Since this ban (and the second, revised refugee ban) occurred during the course of this research, the interview method had to be altered as well as the number of interviews 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 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, particularly as one of my findings results in a call for other scholars to take up this sort of work. There is a clear gap in refugee women's narratives within the literature, 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, despite the steep effort and decrease in interviews, motivated the continuation of this study. Working to create a space for these 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.

Prior to conducting these interviews, I planned to interweave the narratives into a conversation, hoping to compose a single compelling argument. I felt that, by doing this, I would construct a comprehensive narrative through the compilation of many insights and voices. However, upon completing these interviews, it felt important that each narrative claim their own space and be allowed to exist independently. For this reason, I have separated Chapter Four into four separate narratives. In these narratives, I revisit the three research questions guiding this project. I should note that I have chosen to begin with a narrative from a CWS staffer rather than a refugee participant. This choice was made in order to better contextualize the narratives shared by refugee participants later in the chapter and to tie together common themes found throughout the course of the research. These interviews will be further examined in Chapter Five, where I'll discuss

the themes and insights revealed through these discussion and how these narratives and insights can, and do, impact the Harrisonburg resettlement agency specifically.

Sarah-Alice, School Liaison & English Language Training (ELT) Coordinator at Church World Service (CWS)

“We don’t ask [refugees] to share their story because they have been asked to share their story thousands of times. 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.”

I met with Sarah-Alice 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 hour. In our corner, we were somewhat isolated from the hubbub, allowing for our conversation to remain intimate despite all the noise around us. Having known and worked with Sarah-Alice many years ago in a separate refugee agency, there was no need for niceties. Rather, upon reviewing consent information and providing consent, Sarah-Alice immediately launched into the interview, bursting with what she needed to say. I could barely turn on the recorder fast enough.

Sarah-Alice: ...there is funding specifically for cultural orientation but...it’s like a checklist. They need to be told about these 15 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.

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

Sarah-Alice: 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.

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

Sarah-Alice: 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 CWS 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 staff at CWS Harrisonburg 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 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-Alice emphasized the "progressive" stance taken by CWS toward addressing women's needs (and LGBTQ+ needs). Much of this progression, however, is not unified within the organization and often depends on the initiative and dedication of individual CWS staff members. The Harrisonburg CO Class is a product of a caseworker at the Harrisonburg CWS center, and is not a requirement handed down from CWS leadership. Rather, the class is a response from Harrisonburg staff to the received narratives and perceived needs of refugees resettling within the community. Sarah-Alice'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 from which to build from, 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-Alice as we discussed whether refugee women's narratives were welcomed and utilized within the resettlement process:

Sarah-Alice: 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-Alice: ...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-Alice becomes quiet].

I would like to underscore the silence at the end of Sarah-Alice's sentence as it was in this moment where it felt like 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 that I will revisit

in the following Chapters, where the value of narrative, and the space to receive that narrative, is best identified.

Rosette Kazadi⁹, Resettled from Burundi

“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.”

I met Rosette during the Cultural Orientation Class one week after she and her husband, along with three of their children, resettled in Harrisonburg in January of 2017. They were, and are, strongly affected by Trump’s travel ban, as one of their sons was held in the airport and another son and daughter remained trapped in the Congo. 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 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.”

Interviewer: 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?

⁹ All refugee participants were given pseudonyms (chosen by the refugee participant) to protect their identity.

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

Interviewer: 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.]

Rosette's confidence in the value of her story and her willingness to share that story is markedly meaningful. As mentioned in earlier chapters, there is a general feeling of reticence among refugee women to speak within a group setting, often relying on their spouses and/or family members who may, or may not, speak English. However, Rosette sets forth her experience as one that can serve both herself and others and is reflective of how storytelling can be used to share lived experiences, explore personal values, and understand the surrounding social context. As Foss & Foss (1994) would argue, "[one of the tenets] of feminist scholarship is that women's perceptions, meanings, and experiences are taken seriously and valued" (p. 39). In this interview, Rosette's earnest ambition to be taken seriously is palpable, as she reminds me often throughout the conversation that "You can ask any question; I'm here to answer."

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?" and Rosette nods. My attempts to speak French are childish at best, particularly when compared to Rosette's fluency in six different languages. However, 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 Burundi, 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 Burundi to the U.S., but not to Harrisonburg... So, we don't know why. Why our children don't come?

Interviewer: 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 Harrisonburg. 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] in Harrisonburg, 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 she gave to the local newspaper. In that interview, she and 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 now interviewing. Although she was never interviewed as part of 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 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 within 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.

When I finally asked what could be done further to support her, she emphasized that plenty had *already* been done to support her and the rest remained in her hands. She claimed, "I just want money to help my family, to study English, to get a job." However, when asked whether she would be interested in speaking with other refugee women about their experiences, Rosette paused and said "Security here is good, life also is good. It's cold for our children but...I'm living in a beautiful home. I'm eating well with my family, in fact, I have many things that I want. But, in the community, everyone shares a similar history. We are happy to be here, but we can't forget...the other."

Paige Hinton, Intensive Community Orientation Member at CWS

"I think women see the world differently from men. 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?"

When Paige arrived for our interview, she was windswept and out of breath, her purse brimming with paperwork. "Sorry I'm late," she breathed before plopping into 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." Paige is often strapped with work. Her position as an AmeriCorps service member means that she is responsible for not only the 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, in her capacity as the CO Class instructor and coordinator, she designs and implements of the orientation's programming material. It was also Paige who approached me earlier in 2016 about the creation of a women's group.

Interviewer: So, the women's group. I know it's not happening right now - [Paige laughs] and for obvious reasons, but...what were/are the challenges to establishing this group and what were/are your hopes?

Paige: [...] 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 ICO class. We talk a lot about general information [...], but Shirley [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 valued within the Harrisonburg resettlement agency, it becomes evident that the stories of refugees are an essential foundation for many of the programs headed by the Harrisonburg agency, including the CO Class. CWS Harrisonburg 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 that refugee narratives provide crucial insight and guidance towards next steps. However, it is also clear that, while refugee agencies value the experiences and narratives of their refugee clientele, the larger United States bureaucracy does not seem to. This is a point I will elaborate upon further in Chapter Five but, suffice to say, women's narratives and needs have long been unheard and unmet in the United States. This is true not just for refugee women, but for all women within the U.S..

Listening to Paige's concerns and challenges about the women's 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 women's group will need to overcome, and yet there is still an urgency to create this space. In their interviews, Sarah-Alice and Paige both identified an urgency to establish stable and accessible resources for sex education within the resettlement agency. This urgency appears to stem from the experience of five refugee women who recently arrived into the United States and soon after became pregnant. Considering that many women have varying levels of sex education, access to birth control, and pregnancy knowledge, this need is not a new one. However, as Paige points out, the shifting nature of the refugee demographic means that resettlement staff must also shift and forefront different skills and literacies than they have in past iterations of their Cultural Orientation course. Within the narratives of these five pregnant women, a catalyst begins within the agency to specifically forefront and address women's sexual health. Yet, without direct support from the federal government or CWS leadership, the staff are left with both a logistically and culturally complex task. Further,

the grant funding Paige's work restricts her ability to create this space by limiting the different 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, Paige had one emphatic answer:

Paige: Refugee women need to learn English.

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

Paige: 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 Abidi¹⁰, Resettled from Pakistan

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

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 Harrisonburg Church World Service (CWS) resettlement agency. The LC group is a way of integrating refugees into the community by introducing new refugee families to established Harrisonburg 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

¹⁰ All refugee participants were given pseudonyms (chosen by the refugee participant) to protect their identity.

from the kitchen with tea and a generous plate of food. Over this 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 Thailand [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.

Interviewer: 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 Thailand. 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. However, her narrative 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 Antoinette, 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. 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”. There is some concern however that these narratives may be examples of an ideal narrative or “overcoming” narrative, a concern that is unpacked more fully in Chapter Five.

When I ask Shabana what structures could be missing to support her and her family, she pauses. “Our main support after God is CWS,” she says looking to her son. “Without them, we could not go to the doctor.” “But...?” I ask her, “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 CWS 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 to CWS, 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 CWS and the CO Class' (fairly new) emphasis on mental health. It is important to observe that, while CWS is limited in their ability and services, it is the larger humanitarian structures that have failed to fully support refugees. It is the limited funding for resettlement that prevents Shabana from having six months of funding instead of three to find their feet. It is the limited and broken North American healthcare system that strains her family's budget, and it is the stagnant minimum wage and that causes them, and millions of other American citizens, to barely scrape by. Shabana's narrative reveals this and more, and its impact lies in its witnessing to the realities of a larger resettlement system: the good and the bad.

Upon the conclusion of the interview, I stand to hug Shabana and her family enters the room to shake my hand and say goodbye. At the door, Shabana stops me and gestures to the recorder and my notes. "Please," she says, "Tell them, we are not bad. Tell them that Muslims are peaceful; we are a peaceful religion. Islam is about love, not hate." "Of course," I say, "Uh, but Shabana, I'm not a reporter. I'm just a student writing a paper."

She laughs and says, "Then put it in your paper. You promise?"

Willingness and the Unheard Narrative

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 skills and that there are many refugee women who have no desire to share their

experiences with others, it is not because of refugee women'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 their 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 that does not recognize their value within that conversation. As particularly evidenced in Rosette's narrative, refugee women bring forth their narratives but they are often left "waiting to see the result..."

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 Paige's narrative as she discusses the potential challenges in broaching difficult topics during the Women's 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, Paige 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 Paige's narrative tells me precisely what she means. Another example of this unspoken narrative lies in Sarah-Alice'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-Alice's narrative again alludes to a difficult topic: sex, sex education, pregnancy, and contraception. This is a point that she later goes on to elaborate on, sharing that conversations surrounding sexual health are uncomfortable for both refugees and resettlement staff and that resettlement staff acknowledge the importance of addressing these concerns and yet 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 hidden, with CWS staff largely unable to be fully responsive to the needs revealed within those narratives. In the next chapter, I conduct an analysis of these narratives and my observations within the CO Class, ultimately sharing two points most relevant to the CWS Agency within Harrisonburg.

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings

Throughout the course of this study, one question has consistently emerged: What can be done to encourage and enable the sharing of refugee women's narratives? While this study aimed to identify the value of narrative within the resettlement process and challenges in receiving that narrative, the inquiry primarily resided within the resettlement center itself. However, as briefly touched upon in Chapter Four, there is a larger dominant narrative regarding refugee resettlement that should be addressed before returning our focus back to the Harrisonburg Church World Service (CWS) agency. This 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.

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 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.

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. Rather than seeing refugee women and their stories as a separate entity from the community, as an outside group entering the community, we instead need to recognize that refugee women are part of the community.

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 and other agencies was the absence of stable support structures for refugees, including established spaces for refugee women. As demonstrated by the narratives gathered in Chapter Four and the literacies prioritized during the CO Class in Chapter Three, these supports and spaces are absent because they are neither funded nor prioritized by federal, state, or resettlement leadership. As Sarah-Alice 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 in Harrisonburg... [But still] there's not really support for the model that we're doing." Further, the refugee women I've spoken with are telling 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 generally absent in the United States below a certain economic bracket. 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 in Chapter Four as both refugee women discuss their concerns about family, health, safety, stability, and work. "There are a lot of problems in the Congo," Rosette says, reflecting on her resettlement to the United States. "In the Congo, 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 Shabana'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

Thailand, 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.

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).

Narrowing our focus back to the local context of the Harrisonburg CWS agency, there are two specific challenges and opportunities that can be drawn from this study on the reception of refugee women’s narratives. These challenges and opportunities are: The need for regular female interpreters and the need for the prioritization of women’s

experiences, education, integration and welfare by Federal, State, and resettlement leadership. These two points were identified through the analysis of the Cultural Orientation (CO) class and the narratives received by refugees and resettlement staff when attempting to answer the three research questions for this study. These two points encapsulate both the current valuing and utilization of refugee narratives within resettlement and the structures still needed to further enable the inclusion of refugee women's experiences and narratives.

Female Interpreters

Throughout the Intensive Cultural Orientation (ICO) course it was clear how vital volunteer interpreters were to explaining the material in a nuanced way and providing the space necessary for this interaction to successfully occur. CWS interpreters, while trained by the agency, were not employees and instead served on a voluntary basis. They were not paid for their work, nor did they seek compensation. Instead, interpreters were usually former refugees, or the children of refugees, who sought to serve their community. This is a virtuous cycle, but one that is unreliable. Volunteers have obligations outside of the resettlement agency and cannot always provide their services when they are needed. Like many of the services provided by the Harrisonburg resettlement agency, any access to interpreters depends on the staff's initiative and ability to network. This scope becomes even narrower when trying to find female interpreters who possess the level of skill and training necessary to discuss topics of specific cultural sensitivity, such as sex education, abuse, domestic violence, childcare, and healthcare. "I think that, for the expansion of narrative, what...we lack are the female interpreters," Paige advised during her interview. "Usually if a woman is telling me her experience, it's because she speaks English. [We

need female interpreters that have] that cultural understanding that you're all on the same boat here. No one is here to judge you. [...] Also, most of our interpreters are male, so that is definitely a factor.”

Bearing in mind Paige's insight, the issue is not that there are a surplus of male interpreters available who have the skills and expertise necessary to address sensitive issues, but rather, it is to say that there is a scarcity of female interpreters who possess that expertise and are willing to volunteer. Returning again to Paige's narrative from Chapter Four, one sees the crucial role that female interpreters can have in opening up spaces where refugee women's narratives can be welcomed and witnessed:

Having female interpreters for obvious reason(s) [is important]. If someone is talking about a trauma or if their husband is...that they want to feel comfortable, or like a medical issue, they want to feel comfortable. Also, [maybe it needs] to be an interpreter that is not within their community? So, for those women who are feeling judged, maybe not utilizing a refugee woman, [instead using] a stranger that can come in once a week.

While Paige goes on to later argue that interpreters could also prevent refugee women from using their English language skills and inhibit their integration, it cannot be denied the importance that interpreters have within these spaces. While there can be many discussions about the role interpreters *should* have within that space, specifically identifying female interpreters is a crucial first step. The need for this specific resource is evidenced within this very study. Upon the implementation of Trump's travel ban and the collapse of the women's group at CWS, the number of potential participants for this study - and thus the number of women whose stories could be heard - immediately shrank. 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 Paige'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. Absent both 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 CWS Women's Group. As a result, I was forced to lean on the goodwill and friendship of an interpreter I met during my time at the CO 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.

Additionally, it is possible that within this protected space and with the aid of a female interpreter, the narratives shared by refugee women might turn away from their chosen "overcoming narrative". This "overcoming narrative" is what I would classify the stories shared with me by Rosette and Shabana, as they both focused primarily on how they overcame the challenges of resettlement and generally avoided other, conflicted, unspoken and messier narratives. That is not to say that Rosette and Shabana's chosen narrative was somehow disingenuous, that would be wholly inaccurate. Rather, I argue that establishing a space that welcomes and adapts to the concerns of their refugee audience may be better able to encourage and embrace the messier and complicated challenges that occur during integration within a new community. As Paige suggests,

“we’re two worlds apart, but women are the same”. Within this 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”, participate within their larger community, and encourage others to step forward and speak out.

With these points in mind, one can easily see why - to quote Sarah-Alice - “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 narrative exists in the subtext of each interview, living mostly in the pauses and silences within the overall narrative. 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 dominant narratives.

Prioritization of Women’s Narratives by Leadership

During the course of this study, it became evident that scant resources are truly invested into the cultural integration of refugees at the federal level. This neglect cannot be laid only at the feet of the CWS resettlement staffers, who are often overwhelmed with day-to-day functions, but rather stems directly from the lack of prioritization by U.S. leadership. This leadership is particularly lacking when it comes to the prickly issues of

gender, sex, race, and family. Specifically when looking at the Harrisonburg resettlement agency, without direct input from CWS leadership, resettlement staff are alone in addressing the changing priorities of their refugee demographic. It is my suggestion that by hearing more refugee women's narratives, and by further empowering refugee women to share their narratives, 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 from the narratives given in Chapter Four, that these refugee women's strong desire to tell their stories and have them 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, it is possible that Freire's suggestion of a "transformation" a structure "so that they can become "beings for themselves"" could be somewhat 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 Paige and Sarah-Alice's narrative. The narratives of these five pregnant women were a catalyst that forced CWS 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 CWS national headquarters, the Harrisonburg staff remained at a "stalemate". "Some people [in the Harrisonburg agency] feel like it's disrespectful to bring it up too directly," Sarah-Alice 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 direct from the [CWS] office right now to make a decision.” Without this directive from CWS leadership, well-meaning but overworked CWS staffers instead opt to sidestep the issues that they cannot practically or immediately address. Without guidance from CWS leadership, significant issues and needs identified within the narratives of refugee women are not prioritized and remain absent within daily resettlement operations. While avoiding this conflict by CWS resettlement staff is more a reflection of their inability, due to severely limited resources, to pursue these issues further rather than malicious intent, it is a reflection of the type of silencing of women’s issues and experiences that occurs 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-Alice summarizes, “some people [refugee women] have asked for that information, but I just have not been able to be connected to any meaningful services...and, now...like, that’s not what anybody wanted.”

We cannot forget Heath Cabot’s (2016) warning 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-Alice 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 (such as CWS), 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 their 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 validate that knowledge and upend the androcentric tendencies within resettlement that view refugee women as vulnerable and passive victims.

Finally, within both Rosette and Shabana’s narratives we see 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 Africa there is no job, so that's...I was a homemaker. I didn't study.

Interviewer: 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 in Burundi.

Interviewer: Rosette, you are a very optimistic person, I feel!

Rosette: [laughs] Yeah!

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 from which speak. 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.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

Through both my observations and interviews, it became evident that the Harrisonburg Church World Service (CWS) not only is aware of the need to receive refugee women's narratives, but they are actively working to value and integrate these experiences within their resettlement framework. While Chapter Five considered more broadly the role that women's narratives may play in larger narratives about refugees, this chapter is intended to share insights about CWS and provide recommendations to researchers for future research. These insights are drawn upon the evidence identified within both my observations of the Intensive Cultural Orientation (ICO) course and are intended to be shown to all participants within my study and CWS management. In this Chapter, I offer two insights/observations to resettlement centers like CWS and five recommendations for researchers interested in working at such sites. These two insights deal with: the inclusion of women's narratives and needs around sexual health, and the participation of the community at all levels (academic and otherwise) to assist refugee women during their integration experience. My five recommendations to researchers include: the need to recognize refugee women's narratives and the limitations of this study; the need to practice positionality as researchers; and the need to consider the ways researchers curate refugee women's stories and what this sort of research, overall, entails. The goal for these insights and recommendations is to encourage greater inclusion of refugee women's narratives during the creation of resettlement programming by local agencies and resettlement leadership and to provide researchers with some level of insight into the challenges that exist within this work. Finally, it is my hope that this piece

could galvanize activist minded researchers to take up this research and go further than this study was able.

Insights

This use of women's narrative within resettlement can be seen in the frequent adjustments made by CWS to their ICO class and the persistence by Paige and other resettlement staffers to be responsive to refugee women's needs (more specifically, in this case, the needs of five pregnant women). However, this is the exception and not the rule as refugee agencies go, with Sarah-Alice observing "...our class is much more in-depth than most. [...] There's not really support for the model that we're doing." This lack of support points to the absence of leadership by the larger CWS organization, and the need for guidance when addressing women's experiences, particularly around contraception and family planning. However, as the Harrisonburg center is primarily led by women, there appears to be more attention paid to women's issues than in most centers (as noted during the interview with Sarah-Alice). This increased attention is reflected in the material shared within the ICO Course and efforts by staff to provide childcare for refugee families.

While I do not touch upon childcare at any great depth within this piece, providing access to childcare is certainly another critical element within the support and empowerment of newly resettled refugee women. Refugee families who have access to some form of childcare are better able to participate with the ICO and English Language Learners (ELL) course without interruption or distraction. Furthermore, having a month-long, weekly orientation course shortly after arrival within the U.S. provides refugee women and men with greater opportunities to interact with and integrate into their new

community. Most notably, having access to these services and literacies (lingual, cultural, etc.) enables women to participate more fully in their new community, and may also serve to empower refugee women to share their narratives with others.

However, the Harrisonburg ICO Course - despite its progressive nature - still avoids the topic of women's healthcare, and general sex education is not provided at any level. My suggestion for CWS, based on the insights shared with me during this study, is that the topic be included within the ICO format utilizing the input and experiences of refugee women who have previously resettled within the community. The format for this program may need to be separated from the larger course, but prioritizing this information is to recognize the value in refugee women's diverse experiences and needs and these experiences and needs are different from their refugee men's. It is this exact diversity that I recommend the local Harrisonburg agency draw upon when addressing complex issues of contraception and family planning through their ICO program. By drawing on the pre-existing ties with refugee women in the community, CWS can take a step towards including refugee women's narratives within what Sarah-Alice calls "the big checklist".

However, refugee centers cannot operate in isolation. These centers need community members, students, researchers, volunteers, people, *us* in order to be successful. If the Harrisonburg community wants refugees to integrate within the U.S., then it is upon the community to facilitate and participate in that integration. I'd like to note that my use of the term "integration" here is not meant to refer to the complete *assimilation* or Westernization of newly arrived refugees, but rather the valuing and creation of space for these new community members. As mentioned earlier in Chapter

Five, refugees *are* the community and to treat them otherwise is inaccurate and short-sighted. In order to address the challenges/opportunities identified in Chapter Five, it would require hands-on engagement from resettlement staff, researchers, and community members alike. Creating a system that empowers and values refugee women's narratives and experiences necessitates that all those who engage in this work closely examine the current social structures within that system and identify whether these social structures are creating the spaces necessary for refugee women's narratives to emerge. Thus, local support groups (such as the Women's Group) are crucial to understanding what is, or isn't, provided within the larger community. The Harrisonburg CWS agency appears to have recognized this gap and are working towards the creation of that space. It is my recommendation to similar resettlement agencies to follow this agency's lead in facilitating the sharing of refugee women's narratives. If these spaces are found lacking or meet resistance, then I urge resettlement agencies and their communities to take action, to dig deeper, and advocate for the changes necessary to support all women within their community.

Recommendations

First, I need to emphasize that this study is severely limited. With only a qualitative analysis of a few key interviews, this study barely begins to scratch the surface of an immense conversation. However, despite these limitations there is still a clear need for more rhetoricians to engage in this work and seek out the narratives of refugee women. Until refugee women's experiences and voices are valued, examined, and forefronted by researchers, we overlook a huge demographic. Refugee women face a complexity of challenges that are markedly different from refugee men, and until their

narratives and experiences are sought out with intention and valued, then we continue to participate in the systemic silencing of a significant portion of our community. My recommendation is for researchers to recognize this absence and explore the various factors that impact the reception of refugee women's narratives during the resettlement process. By doing so, researchers may be able to aid in identifying common challenges and strategies for accessing and making space for these narratives.

Second, there are many challenges for researchers who wish to conduct any form of investigation within this area. The contexts vary and are rarely generalizable, and, as was the case in my research at James Madison University, there are many levels of bureaucracy that must be first managed and addressed. In particular, there is resistance to conducting this research for fear of potentially harming a "vulnerable population" by triggering traumatic experiences during an interview. While this remark is not an indictment of those ethical concerns, it is important to note that these attempts to protect a vulnerable population also serve to continue the dominant narrative that refugees are fragile, damaged, and/or separate from the community. It is my observation that these individuals are instead resilient, wholly human, and entirely constitute *the* community. Furthermore, language is a consistent challenge for researchers who wish to access the narratives of this, and any, population, and having access to an interpreter may be crucial to a researcher's success. There is also a question about the type of narrative given and received by researchers, as there may be a desire by participants to give a "correct" or positive answer. For these reasons, it is my recommendation that a researcher fully immerse themselves within the community they are observing and work with purpose

towards creating the narrative spaces crucial in seeking out and welcoming complex, messy, and/or difficult narratives (as elaborated on in Chapter Five).

Third, this “seeking out” is not to be confused with the co-opting or acquisition of narrative. Rather, when conducting this work, I urge researchers to exercise feminist methodologies of consent and reciprocity and to treat the narratives shared with careful attention and awareness of positionality. This approach of positionality guided me throughout the study, and enabled me to reconsider much of my approach toward both the process and final product. Initially, (as mentioned in Chapter Five) when taking on this project, I entered with the mindset of “identifying resources” and “helping” refugee women to share their narratives. However, what I failed to understand was that I was separating out refugee women from the rest of the community and perpetuating white supremacist modes of thought where inclusion is handed down by a member of the “inside community”. Of course, that was never my intent, but because of my positionality, I was unable to see the flaw in my approach. Through the practice of positionality, I was eventually able to identify my error and adjust accordingly. Thus, it is my recommendation to researchers that they practice positionality, not just in name, but with dedication and careful attention.

Fourth, I advise researchers to consider the ways in which they curate refugee women’s narratives within their research. While I have done my best to provide each narrative with their own space, these stories still underwent some level of curation at my hand and were shortened, amended, or edited for clarity. It is my hope that, despite this limited curation, I have been able to contextualize and present these narratives in a way that maintains their integrity. Overall, I recommend that researchers utilize positionality

when curating and (whenever possible) share their work with participants to ensure a “fundamentally consensual approach to inquiry” (Stringer, 2007, p. 16).

Fifth, and finally, I recommend that researchers consider, overall, what this type of research entails. Due to the nature of this study, and its focus on the narratives and experiences of refugee women, the topics covered range from politics, transportation, health care, sex education, and more. This inclusion of multiple topics is because the silencing of refugee women’s narratives is built within a larger patriarchal social system that impacts many elements of the resettlement experience within the United States. When pursuing research into the ways in which refugee women can/do create and participate in narrative-sharing spaces to resist this silencing, researchers must also account for these various elements and challenges.

Future Research

Moving forward, I will continue to volunteer with the local resettlement agency in Harrisonburg and aid the Women’s Group organizers - however I can - in overcoming the challenges to creating that group. It is my hope that this project can provide one small step towards that goal and give a somewhat broad assessment of the CO Course and Harrisonburg CWS agency, identifying ways that each has valued and scaffolded spaces for refugee women’s narratives. Considering again that there are relatively few studies focusing specifically on the resettlement experiences of refugee women within the United States (despite the fact that more than half of refugees are women, according to

UNHCR¹¹) I encourage rhetoricians and researchers to pursue future research in this direction.

Suggestions for future research would include an analysis of the ways employment, childcare, language and transportation services impact the sharing and reception of refugee women's narratives. I would suggest rhetoricians carefully consider the physical and rhetorical spaces made for refugee women within their local agencies and communities, and identify the impact their experiences can/may have within larger U.S. policy. Further, I would urge researchers to address the complexity of LGBTQ+ issues within resettlement, as both narratives and narrative space for this community appears to be largely absent. As Paige briefly noted during her interview, "I haven't heard any of those [LGBTQ+] narratives from any sort of refugees. I'm constantly thinking...we already have trouble setting up a women's group, I don't even know where I would begin [with that group]!"

Finally, I urge you - fellow feminists, activists, and researchers - to conduct this work, to seek out refugee women's narratives and experiences. I exhort you to conduct this work but not in the manner that Daniel (the oblivious journalism student from Chapter Two) conducted his work. Instead, I urge you to volunteer, to become entrenched in the community you're observing, to provide service and identify ways in which your work and/or research can contribute practically to that community. It is not enough to draw on theory if that theory is not then spent in practice. There is vital work to be done here, and it is work that requires investment by the researcher in both time, energy, and

¹¹ Women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced, or stateless population.

skill. As rhetorician Ellen Cushman (1996) reminds us (who also references Paulo Freire here): “In doing our scholarly work, we should take social responsibility for the people from and with whom we come to understand a topic... “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (64)” (p. 11).

References

- Alcoff, L. (1991-92). The Problem of Speaking for Others. *Cultural Critique*, 5-32.
- Booth, W. C. (2004). *The rhetoric of rhetoric: the quest for effective communication*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 51 & 54.
- Cabot, H. (2016). 'Refugee Voices': Tragedy, Ghosts, and the Anthropology of Not Knowing. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 1-28.
- Cushman, E. (1996). The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change. *College Composition and Communication*, 47.1, 7-28.
- Deutsch, N. L. (2004). Positionality and the pen: Reflections on the process of becoming a feminist researcher and writer. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10.6, 885-902.
- DeVault, M. (1990). Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis. *Social Problems*, 37, 96-116.
- Edwards, A. (2010). Transitioning gender: Feminist engagement with international refugee law and policy 1950-2010. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 29.2, 21-45.
- Foss K. A., & Foss, S. K. (1994). Personal Experience as Evidence in Feminist Scholarship. *Western Journal of Communication*, 58, 39-43.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder, 54-55.
- Glenn, C. (1997). "The Implications of a Regendered, Retold Rhetoric". *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition From Antiquity Through the Renaissance*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997, 173-179.
- Glenn, C. (2011). "Rhetoric and Feminism: The Possibilities of Women and Beyond." *African Yearbook of Rhetoric*. AYOR 1 - Gender Rhetoric: North-South, 2011, 42-51.
- Hopkins, L. (2009). Why Narrative? Reflections on the Politics and Processes of Using Narrative in Refugee Research. *Tamara Journal September 8.8.2, 2009*, 135-45.
- Hyndman, J. (2010). Introduction: the feminist politics of refugee migration. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 453-459.
- Jaji, R. (2015). Normative, agitated, and rebellious femininities among East and Central African refugee women. *Gender Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 494-509.

- Juergensmeyer, E. (2011). Sharing Control: Developing Research Literacy through Community-Based Action Research. *Community Literacy Journal* 5.2, 153-167.
- Lenette, C., Cox, L., & Brough, M. (2015). Digital Storytelling as a Social Work Tool: Learning from Ethnographic Research with Women from Refugee Backgrounds. *British Journal of Social Work*, 988-1005.
- McPherson, M. (2015). *Refugee women, representation and education: Creating a discourse of self-authorship and potential*, 176.
- Ott, E. UNHCR. (2011). Get up and go: refugee resettlement and secondary migration in the USA. *New Issues in Refugee Research*, 32.
- Pulvirenti, M., & Mason, G. (2011). Resilience and survival: Refugee women and violence. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 23(1), 37-52.
- Royster, J. J. (1996). "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. 2nd Ed. Ed. Victor Villanueva. Urbana: NCTE, 2003.
- Silvey, R. (2004). Power, difference and mobility: feminist advances in migration studies. *Progress in Human Geography*, 28(4), 490-506.
- Smith, K. (2015). Stories Told By, For, and About Women Refugees: Engendering Resistance. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 461-469.
- Stringer, E.T. (2007). *Action Research*, 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 16.
- Temple, B., & Moran, R. (2006). *Doing Research with Refugees: Issues and Guidelines*. Bristol, UK: Policy, 41.
- UNHCR. (2015, November 20). Women: Particular Challenges and Risk. *The United Nations Refugee Agency*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c1d9.html>
- Walton, R., Zraly, M., & Mugengana, J. P. (2014). Values and Validity: Navigating Messiness in a Community-Based Research Project in Rwanda. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 24(1), 45-69.
- William, K. K. (2014). Beyond Stories of Victimhood: Narrating Experiences of Displacement. *Life Writing*, 437-455.
- Women's March on Washington (2017). Mission & Vision. Retrieved from <https://www.womensmarch.com/mission/>