

**“If we are crying out together, then we can remain in peace:”  
Constructing Community with Newcomer Women**

**By**

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## **Abstract**

Through the use of semi-structured and narrative interviewing, this study considers the perspectives of twelve newcomer women engaged in organizing and facilitating community activities with other newcomer women. The participants shared their views on the challenges faced by newcomer women, and the strength that these women access through community support. The study is grounded in an analysis of literature derived from such interdisciplinary sources as Peace and Conflict Studies, feminism, anthropology, and community-development.

While newcomer women are faced with numerous hardships and losses, the participants – everyday peacemakers – emphasize the importance of empowerment. They engage in creating spaces for women to gather, form relationships, and benefit from economic and social development. Through this work, the women foster a form of ‘constrained empowerment’ that exists within the context of various structural barriers to well-being. Despite being constrained, this form of empowerment provides the foundation for social change, and social justice.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Purpose of Study – Research Questions.....	3
Organization of the Thesis.....	4
<b>1 – GENDER, CONFLICT, AND AGENCY: CREATING SPACE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.....</b>	<b>8</b>
Feminism and Structural Violence.....	9
Feminist Perspectives on Culture and Identity.....	17
Community Development and Empowerment.....	22
<b>2 – CANADIAN IMMIGRATION: HISTORY, EXPERIENCES, AND CHALLENGES.....</b>	<b>32</b>
Historical Context of Canadian Immigration.....	32
After Arrival: Experiences in Canada.....	38
Winnipeg: Challenges and Spaces for Social Change.....	42
<b>3 – METHODOLOGY: APPROACHES ROOTED IN RESPECT.....</b>	<b>46</b>
Methodological Approaches.....	46
Theory in Practice.....	50
<b>4 – DISEMPOWERING INFLUENCES – EXPERIENCES OF HARDSHIP AND LOSS.....</b>	<b>60</b>
Loss of Community.....	60
Loss of Family.....	69
Loss of Economic Security.....	77
Loss of Personal Security and Well-being.....	92
Conclusion.....	100
<b>5 – AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT: NEWCOMER WOMEN AS EVERYDAY PEACEMAKERS.....</b>	<b>103</b>
Supporting Voice, Freedom, and Resilience.....	104

Empathy, Patience, and Social Change.....	112
Negotiating Change as Everyday Peacemakers.....	115
Conclusion.....	123
<b>6 – COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: CREATING THE SPACE FOR CONNECTION, FRIENDSHIP, AND POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE.....</b>	<b>125</b>
Conceptions of Community.....	126
Grassroots Organizing.....	136
Economic Development.....	143
Talking and Storytelling.....	151
Constrained Empowerment and Sites of Resistance.....	159
Conclusion.....	164
<b>7 – REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EVERYDAY PEACEMAKERS AND CONSTRAINED EMPOWERMENT.....</b>	<b>166</b>
Gender and Structural Violence.....	167
Newcomer Women’s Agency and the Construction of Identity.....	169
Empowerment and Community Building.....	172
Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research.....	174
Significance.....	175
Everyday Peacemakers and Constrained Empowerment.....	177
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>193</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### **Constructing Community with Newcomer Women**

Much research is now being devoted to the experiences of newcomers, and particularly newcomer women, after they immigrate to Canada. These studies focus on the ways that newcomers experience immigration and settlement in Canada (George 2002), and the challenges and hardships faced by newcomer women (Norquay 2004; Spitzer 2007). Newcomer women (immigrants and resettled refugees) experience numerous challenges including forms of structural violence and systemic barriers to well-being. Yet, newcomer women are also active in resisting and responding to these challenges through a variety of means. Scholars in feminist theory<sup>1</sup> and Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS)<sup>2</sup> argue that the perceptions and experiences of ordinary, everyday people are worthy of study, and are significant for understanding broader social constructs and systems (Enloe 2004; Mac Ginty 2013). This study embarks on a qualitative examination of the views of twelve newcomer women who engage in community-building with other newcomer women in their communities. The intention behind the study is to create an understanding of the perceptions of newcomer women regarding the challenges they face, and the way they exercise their agency and resist these challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Feminist theory concerns itself with acknowledging the influence of gender, and the social construction of gender, on power dynamics, structures, and institutions. Feminists aim to raise consciousness about gender-based oppression, and how these experiences interlock and intersect with other aspects of identity such as race and class (Richardson, Taylor, and Whittier 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Peace and Conflict Studies is an interdisciplinary field that concerns itself with the study of conflict at different levels of analysis (*e.g.* interpersonal, intergroup, and international) and approaches to the transformation of conflict and development of peace. Peace is a condition that includes not only the absence of direct forms of violence, but also the presence of social justice (Matyok 2012).

In June 2011, I attended the launch of a cookbook created by a women's group at a church in my neighbourhood. I had been invited by one of the members of the organization and attended the launch by myself. At the time I did not know that newcomer women's organizations in Winnipeg would become the focus of my attention and research so I did not bring a notebook, but just came and observed, and enjoyed the stories and the food. Over the past few years this experience has stayed with me as I contemplated the meaning of the event for the women gathered in the church.

It was a bright, sunny June day, and Osborne Village was bustling as it always is on the nice days of spring and summer. This little community in Winnipeg, Osborne Village, has always been a favorite of mine because of the people. There are always people out walking, looking in the stores, eating, and meeting friends. It's a place where people live, but it's also a place where people meet over music, food, coffee, and drinks.

There were a number of women in attendance in the church; many of them were presumably members of the organization, and their family and friends. The room was filled with both women and men who came in, bought cookbooks, listened to the presentations and music, and ate the traditional dishes that were provided. While eating, people mingled among friends, families, and strangers in the community.

I remember the food being delicious, but what really struck me was the level of emotion in the room. Many of the women had big smiles on their faces, and seemed very happy and excited to be there as their work was coming to fruition. As the presentations were going on, women began crying, and they praised one of the organizers of the group. Many of the women seemed elated at their accomplishment and it became obvious that this was not simply a cooking class. There was something going on here, something

meaningful and deep. I bought a cookbook, had it signed by one of the organizers, and after speaking with a few people I walked home. As I was walking, enjoying the beautiful day, I thought about the women and the experience they had just shared with us.

As a feminist, I have always been interested in the stories of women. I want to learn about their challenges and deconstruct the ways that they are oppressed by the various manifestations of patriarchy. At the same time, I also want to learn about the strength and agency that are exhibited by women, even when they are facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. Refugee and immigrant women face significant challenges after their arrival in Canada. The goal of this research is to learn more about the challenges that newcomer women face, but also about the strength that exists in communities, and how women support each other in becoming empowered, and what that means and looks like to the women themselves.

### **Purpose of the Study – Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to create a greater understanding of the worldview and perspectives of newcomer women regarding their roles as organizers and facilitators of community activities with other newcomer women. The research questions how the women define their role in the community, along with what they would like to achieve through their work. Additionally, the study examines the significance of community to these practitioners and how their goals relate to broader concepts of peacebuilding, social change, and social justice. To answer these questions the qualitative methods of semi-structured and narrative interviews were used to allow the participants to share their knowledge and experiences in a framework that respects and values these contributions. The methodology of the study is intended to reflect the notion, emphasized by John Paul



Lederach (1995), that change must be driven from the grassroots in order to create sustainable peace. This research aims to assist in addressing a gap in literature regarding women's experiences of conflict and oppression, and most significantly, their strength, agency, and resistance to these oppressions.

### **Organization of the Thesis**

To build an understanding of the perceptions of immigrant and refugee women who engage in community-building with newcomer women in Canada, this study explores the views of twelve of these everyday peacemakers, regarding the challenges they face, and the collective strength they sustain through their work. The information derived from this study will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding women's experiences of structural violence, and the ways they exercise their agency to resist these forms of oppression and promote social change and social justice. This thesis is organized into seven chapters that review relevant research and theory, and discuss the findings of this study.

The first chapter of the body of the thesis presents an overview of the relevant literature that informed the research project. This chapter is organized into three sections representing significant areas of research related to this topic. The first section discusses feminist approaches to understanding the significance of conflict and oppression in women's lives, focusing on a post-structural feminist perspective. This section considers the ways that women experience conflict, and the ways that they resist, and exercise their agency. This is followed by a section on feminist perspectives on culture and identity and is particularly influenced by Sally Engle Merry's (2006) theory of contested culture. The

literature review chapter is concluded by a discussion of community-building theories and approaches to the empowerment of marginalized populations.

The second chapter presents the context of the study in terms of a brief overview of the history of immigration to Canada. This is followed by a discussion of the circumstances that lead to the immigration of both refugees and economic migrants. This chapter reviews some of the noted challenges that newcomers, and newcomer women in particular, face after immigration to Canada. The chapter concludes with a description of the context of Winnipeg, Manitoba and an overview of the experiences of newcomers to this city.

The third chapter reviews the methodology that guided the study, and the methods that were used to conduct the research. The methodological approaches that guided the research project include those derived from PACS and feminist literature that focus on the consideration of power dynamics in the research process, and the inclusion and respect afforded to the participants in the creation of knowledge. To this end, twelve women were interviewed using semi-structured and narrative methods. In order to maintain the authenticity and accuracy of my portrayal of the participants' voices, the participants were able to provide feedback on the themes of the analysis and their quotes that were used throughout the thesis.

The analysis and discussion section is broken into three chapters that discuss the central topics that arose from the interviews. Chapter four presents an overview of the perspectives and stories of the participants regarding their experiences in Canada. These stories focus on the disempowering hardships and losses experienced by newcomer

women including their loss of community, family, economic security, and personal security and well-being.

Chapter five focuses on the participants' views on agency and empowerment. The study participants discuss what they want to achieve in their work, and their hopes for the future of their communities. These discussions often centered on the desire for women to be empowered, and 'feel free' and independent in their lives. Voice, and the ability to speak out are important themes in this chapter that were presented by the participants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the participants are active agents of change, or everyday peacemakers, in their communities as they create space for newcomer women to negotiate their changing context, and remake meaning in a positive and safe environment.

Chapter six describes the sites of resistance used by the participants as organizers and facilitators of community building activities. This work represents the participants' contributions as everyday peacemakers in their communities as they engage in economic and social development with newcomer women. Through grassroots community-building the participants create space for women to build their skills, and to gather the courage and strength to speak out about their experiences in a safe space, among other women. Through these actions, the participants foster a form of empowerment, which I refer to as 'constrained empowerment,' among newcomer women that can act as the foundation for further social change and social justice.

Chapter seven represents the reflections and concluding remarks of the study. In this chapter the key findings of the study are reviewed, along with the limitations and significance of the research. The chapter is concluded with an overview of a key finding

of the study, the significance of everyday peacemakers and constrained empowerment for the PACS field.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Gender, Conflict, and Agency: Creating Space for Social Change**

This section presents the main theoretical perspectives and themes that inform the research project. The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of newcomer women who organize and facilitate community activities with other newcomer women. The study looks at how these women view their engagement with newcomer women and their role in the community, and what newcomers' perspectives are on challenges and strengths existing in the community. The study considers how the participants' work and goals promote the empowerment of newcomer women, and relate to broader concepts of peacebuilding such as social justice by responding to forms of direct and structural violence.

This chapter will explore three main areas of research that inform the theoretical approach to this study: feminism and structural violence, feminist perspectives on culture and identity, and community development and empowerment. In the first section, a post-structuralist feminist perspective is used to explicate the importance of a gendered perspective in the analysis of conflict, along with the persistence of gender-based violence and gendered forms of structural violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. Women's everyday expressions of agency and resistance are also considered.

A post-structural feminist perspective is also utilized in the second section to explore the constructed nature of gender, identity, and culture, and how this relates to agency, empowerment, and change. Perceptions of identity are disrupted by conflict and migration – a process that can have a significant impact on gender roles and expectations.

While this can lead to conflict, it can also create an opportunity for women to construct new meanings, and pursue positive social change.

The chapter is concluded with a discussion of approaches to community development and empowerment. The concept of asset-based community development is not only useful for promoting empowerment among previously marginalized groups, and creating sustainable grassroots forms of development, but it is a useful concept to consider from a feminist research perspective. By focusing on assets and strengths as opposed to deficits and challenges, researchers and practitioners recognize the agency, knowledge, and skills held by these marginalized groups. This approach can allow research and practice to become truly empowering. These areas of study were chosen to create a foundational understanding of the gendered consequences of various forms of violence including structural violence, as well as the intersections between culture, identity, agency, and empowerment.

### **Feminism and Structural Violence**

Numerous feminist theories have attempted to elucidate how to understand women's identities and roles within various social contexts. When considering various forms of conflict, feminist theorists have explored the ways that women are affected by conflict, and the ways that women engage with structures and institutions to promote both peace and conflict. The study of conflict and peace through a gendered or feminist lens allows researchers to ask questions previously unasked, and learn about the gendered dynamics that lead to conflict, occur during conflict, and persist post-conflict (Enloe 2010, 8-9). Tami Jacoby (2005) warns that some theorists draw links between supposed 'feminine' attributes and an orientation toward pacifism (12). This essentialist

perspective has been challenged by post-modern and post-structuralist feminists who argue that women's identities are both self and socially constructed within their context and cannot be reduced to a single truth or ideal (Sylvester 2002, 177). This approach acknowledges the diversity of women's responses to conflict and peace, while "valu[ing] women's lived experiences as a crucial and legitimate form of knowledge" (Jacoby 2005, 22-23). Post-structural feminism informs this study's approach to the understanding the construction of women's multiple identities, and actions as agents of change.

Addressing both direct and structural violence and inequality is essential to building a culture of peace. A focus on the gendered dimension of conflict has been lacking in recent history, despite the significant impact which conflict has had on women (Leatherman and Griffin 2011, 362; Sandole-Staroste 2011). The silence in research and policy-making regarding this topic contributes to the power structures that allow these practices and injustices to continue (Leatherman 2011, 3). Silence and secrecy abound as well within communities regarding sexual violence due to the importance placed on honour within families as well as prevalent social taboos (Krog 2001, 205; Borer *et al.* 2006, 36; Leatherman and Griffin 2011, 363). Oppression directed at women through direct and structural violence, along with a culture of silence regarding these issues can lead to disenfranchisement and the internalization of oppression (Fanon 1968; Merry 2009, 22; Leatherman 2011, 108). Addressing these issues in research and practice contributes to the goal of positive peace (Galtung 1969; Confortini 2006, 335) and social justice.

Feminist approaches to the study of conflict and peace shed light on forms of oppression that may otherwise be overlooked. Gender-based violence is experienced by

women across the globe and takes many forms. The micro-level acts of individualized violence are connected with macro-level structural violence experienced as social and economic inequality; the violence existing at both levels are gendered and related to power structures in society (Merry 2009, 2, 19; Zuckerhut 2011, 21). In conflict and post-conflict situations, women face a variety of abuses including physical violence, sexual violence, abduction, and exacerbated economic inequality due to the loss of a male breadwinner, or forced migration (Brotsky 2011; Ni Aolain *et al.* 2011, 5). Risk and reality of violence sometimes continues after fleeing the conflict to a refugee camp, or migrating to another country (Cockburn 2001, 26; Kaufman and Williams 2010, 49; Leatherman 2011, 102). Women experience heightened risk to their physical security in refugee camps due to the structural design of camps, and their need to leave the camp to gather firewood and fetch water (Lykes 2010, 75). Migration, both forced and voluntary, may exacerbate stress within a family and can lead to increased incidence of domestic violence (Radan 2007, 151; Merry 2009, 116; Leatherman 2011, 90).

Post-structural feminism is also useful for questioning violence that is not obvious, that is sometimes invisible, or that occurs at the margins. Structural violence is an important concept to consider when studying forms of gendered oppression. It can be seen in forms such as racism, sexism, poverty and colonialism that are hidden “within the hegemony of ordinariness [...] in the mundane details of everyday life” (Merry 2009, 5). These forms of oppression are created through gender relations of power and embedded within various aspects of social organization including language (Confortini 2006, 356). Approaches to empowerment and peace, even among activists in these areas, may differ according to their social location and lived experiences. Post-structural feminism helps



understand the variable ways that oppression is experienced, along with the variable ways that women pursue empowerment and justice.

An analysis of the experiences of women who are exposed to direct and structural violence allows for an understanding of the impact of conflict on human security (Reardon 2010, 11). Conflict threatens women's access to basic needs including food, quality healthcare, and a livable income (Heath 2011, 14-18). Gendered power dynamics, along with expectations related to gender performance, contribute to the direct and structural violence women experience during and after conflict (Moser 2001, 37; Merry 2009, 3; Canning 2010, 855). A gender analysis also problematizes the notion that newcomer women and former refugees are free from violence after migrating to countries in the global north. Direct and structural forms of gender violence exist throughout the world; however, from place to place they may differ in their manifestation, and the manner in which they are defined (Merry 2009, 1).

While women around the world are faced with a variety of oppressions, it is a mistake to assume women ascribe similar meanings to their experiences. One of the tendencies of Western feminist scholarship is the imagining of women as a category of analysis, united in the common oppression of patriarchal institutions and systems (Mohanty 2003, 22; Merry 2009, 15). The assumption of commonality or universality of oppression based on gender "is problematic, based as it is on the assumption that the categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible" (Mohanty 2003, 107). Both post-structuralist feminists and post-colonial theorists assert that it is context, history, meaning, and the intersection of different aspects of identity that lend significance to women's experiences (Merry 2009, 13; Lykes 2010, 71).

A belief in the universality of oppression may lead to the creation of binary categories of those with the agency to resist oppression – that is, Western women – and those without agency, the exoticized ‘other’ (hooks 1999, 181; Mohanty 2003, 31; Snyder 2003, 45). These assumptions promote a reductive understanding of identity, meaning, and agency and are not conducive to a deep, thoughtful analysis of power structures or methods of resistance (Mohanty 2003, 31). These assumptions may also contribute to the idea that Western women are positioned to ‘save’ or ‘liberate’ the passive Third World victim of oppression, denying their agency and historical and ongoing activism (Butler 2009; Bergner 2011, 106; Chishti and Farhoumand-Sims 2011, 122-123). Anna Snyder (2003) notes that conflict and marginalization exist even among NGO networks and activists geared toward promoting women’s empowerment and social justice, yet these conflicts may be constructive when they result in the transformation of relationships and the creation of mutually acceptable solutions or ideas.

Women are active in their resistance to conflict and oppression in a variety of ways. Despite its inherent dangers, many women respond to violence and conflict by becoming involved in community and national activism. In Liberia, women utilized non-violent actions and demonstrations, gathered women across religious divides, and attended the peace negotiations, demanding an end to the violence (Leatherman 2011, 158; Snyder and Stobbe 2011, 1-2). Groups such as women’s peace organizations can offer space for women to challenge traditional gender roles while offering alternative solutions to conflict than those that may be offered by masculinist institutions (Jacoby 2005, 15). Women often become the head of household during times of conflict as their spouses are killed or recruited as soldiers. Some women may develop new strategies to

receive income to support their families including innovative commerce (Cockburn 2001, 26-27; Tursunova 2011).

Women's organizations around the world have pursued projects aimed at improving the well-being of women locally while accessing, utilizing, and contextualizing international legal frameworks such as the Convention for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) in order to promote women's rights at a national level (Merry 2006; Chishti and Farhoumand-Sims 2011, 134-140). Women in refugee camps have organized to develop projects to address their physical and material needs as well as promote literacy and awareness of women's rights (Lykes 2010, 78). These actions highlight women's agency and refute the assumption that women who have experienced conflict or refugee situations are merely victims.

Women are not passive recipients of oppression and violence, but actively resist oppression and engage in peacebuilding. Gendered dynamics shape both the context of conflict and violence, as well as the meanings associated with gender roles and the construction of identity (Enloe 2010, 57-58). Recognition of women's agency, despite or due to experiences of trauma, leads one to complicate their view of so-called 'vulnerable' populations. They are not merely victims requiring services, nor warriors without emotional or psychological needs. They are community activists, mothers, wives, and a host of other identities, all of whom are affected by violence and conflict in different ways, and benefit from a variety of support systems.

Women's agency can take many forms, whether revolutionary acts of resistance as shown by Liberian women or more subtle forms, tempered by the structural constraints in which they are located. Agency refers to the "ways in which women organize,

mobilize, politicize, and struggle within and beyond [patriarchal] structures for rights, status, and equality” (Jacoby 2005, 129). The limitations placed on feminist or gendered activism and agency by prevailing social structures has been defined in a number of ways within feminist literature. Jacoby calls this tension the “mobilization-marginalization phenomenon” faced by feminist activists who must decide to work either within established power structures while avoiding critiquing the patriarchal nature of these structures or to remain autonomous as grassroots organizations and face marginalization in terms of power and funding (Ibid., 8-10).

Anna Snyder (2011a) and Susan Chase (1995) discuss the constrained nature of women’s activism and empowerment in situations where women face various forms of violence (both structural and direct), along with marginalization and oppression. These theorists refer to women’s empowerment in these situations as being ‘ambivalent’ (Snyder 2011a, 22), or ‘ambiguous’ (Chase 1995). In these studies, women claim agency and are empowered in some senses, yet they still operate and live within structures that oppress them. Their empowerment is not radical, nor revolutionary, but it speaks to their lived reality and their agency, and sets the stage for further action.

Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2008) also discusses empowerment and agency existing within structural constraints in her concept of ‘patriarchy trading’ (100). Women face patriarchal structures in various aspects of their lives, and respond to these structures in unique ways that reflect their individual circumstances, social location, and lived realities. The Ahmadi women in Ahmed-Ghosh’s (2004) study choose to cope with the patriarchal oppressions associated with being immigrant women in the United States, by “express[ing] their agency” through religious practice that also entails a degree of gender

discrimination or “gendered hierarchy” (73). Ahmed-Ghosh (2004) notes that the participating Ahmadi women gained social status and coping mechanisms through their faith, yet they could not be considered ‘empowered’ per se as they did not exhibit substantial social, political, or economic power (78). Religion facilitates the maintenance of a communal lifestyle, the ability to transmit cultural norms to their children, and an outlet for building social bonds and friendship with other women (Ibid., 80-81). While it remains a patriarchal structure, women who exercise their agency through religious practice and affiliation are also able to negotiate other aspects of their identities, and perhaps engage in challenging dominant discourses within their community and in the mainstream (Ibid., 88).

James Scott (1985) notes the importance of “everyday forms of resistance” (*xvi*) that are used by marginalized populations to slowly and constantly push for social change against significant structural barriers. These forms of resistance are rooted in the grassroots and respond to their lived reality. Roger Mac Ginty (2013) also discusses the importance of ‘everyday peace’ and the ordinary people who make it possible through shared coping mechanisms that are ingrained in everyday life. While not necessarily revolutionary in their intention, everyday forms of resistance may inform broader movements for social change (Scott 1985, 348-9). Migrant and immigrant women face multiple challenges and oppressions through the intersection of aspects of their identities. Their expressions of agency and empowerment are also multiple and may take revolutionary forms, or may be constrained or ambivalent.

Cynthia Enloe (2004) importantly clarifies that feminist analyses must not be focused solely on the halls of power in order to critique patriarchal structures, but must

also consider the “informal, private, casual conversations, [and] the shared jokes, gestures, and rituals” that – along with institutions, systems, and ideologies – form the location of patriarchy (5). All aspects of social life are influenced by patriarchal structures and systems, and it is up to ‘curious feminists,’ as Enloe (2004) describes them, to uncover and challenge the ways that women’s lives and contributions are devalued in society. In turn, feminist analyses must consider the everyday forms of resistance and empowerment that are pursued by women at the grassroots level. While these actions may not be revolutionary, they speak to the lived realities of women who face numerous barriers to agency and well-being. Despite being constrained by direct and structural forms of violence, this type of empowerment creates the foundation for further action in support of social justice.

### **Feminist Perspectives on Culture and Identity**

Concepts such as culture and identity are important for this type of research, not only in informing research methodologies and methods, but also in the analysis of the institutions and structures that erect barriers to, or facilitate a person’s enjoyment of well-being and positive peace. To understand these barriers, the theory of intersectionality is useful. Intersectionality “deal[s] with the synchronicity between and interaction among (hetero)sexism, racism, class marginalization and other classic ‘isms’ linked to sociocultural categories” (Staunaes and Sondergaard 2011, 46). Women, as a category, do not respond to conflict, or to migration and resettlement in the same way. Their experiences are informed by their social location that “offers and constrains access to social and material goods, identities, opportunities, and power” (Spitzer 2011a, 17).

People make meaning related to their circumstances through the different lenses of their different aspects of identity.

Meanings associated with culture and identity are fluid and changing. Culture is often assumed to be fixed and grounded in traditions of the past; however, this understanding of culture essentializes entire groups of people and denies resistance and change (Merry 2001, 32; Merry 2006, 8-9). Anthropologists now suggest that culture should be understood as constructed within its context, and that it changes in response to internal contestation of values and norms (Griffiths 2001, 120; Merry 2006, 15; Hopkins 2010, 526). The idea of contested culture recognizes that individuals reside within different social locations and ascribe differential meanings to their experiences. Individual identity is also shaped, in part, by social context (Merry 2006, 185; Cook-Huffman 2011, 20; Snyder 2011b, 47). In one context a woman may define herself in terms of her role in her family; in another a woman may define herself as a victim of sexual violence. These self-images may co-exist or be in conflict (Merry 2006, 184; Spitzer 2007, 54). When culture is invoked as an explanation for gender-based violence and gender discrimination, the argument fails to acknowledge the variable support for these norms and institutions, and the overall contested nature of culture (Merry 2001, 38).

In situations of conflict, the institutions and social expectations which govern women's and men's lives shift. Meanings associated with the "politics of marriage, of property, of sexuality, of women's paid work, of parenting" change in response to shifting power dynamics; making war and conflict explicitly gendered activities (Enloe 2010, 5). Enloe (2010) explains that some of the gendered consequences of war include: increased incidence of sexual violence against women; unequal access to benefits from

disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs; the stigmatization of women and girls who have experienced rape and violence; and the forcible removal of women and girls from the public sphere (84-85). All of these issues have a profound impact on women's freedom, and ability to assert their rights.

In conflict situations women's identities are often used by elites to reinforce a collective group identity. In identity-based or anti-colonial conflicts, notions of women and womanhood have been co-opted to promote a cohesive identity for the group, while "placing stringent controls on the women as a part of gaining control of the national destiny" (Anderson 2006, 269). Structural violence leads to types of gender-based violence such as domestic and intimate partner abuse, which may also be used to strengthen group cohesion and intragroup hierarchy (Zuckerhut 2011, 21). These practices have roots in pre-existing social and cultural attitudes toward women, but they become exaggerated in the context of conflict and in response to threat (Moghadam 2011, 146).

Women's identities and bodies have been used as political tools during conflict throughout history. Women's identities as "mothers and the caretakers of the culture" are appropriated by elites wishing to promote solidarity within the group (Anderson 2006, 270). Women's bodies become "sites of contestation;" symbols of the struggle against an outside threat (Zuckerhut 2011, 21). In this context, gender-based violence may become more prevalent as elites attempt to "restore the gendered order" and protect the collective sense of honour, linked with women's bodies and freedom (Enloe 2010, 38). Colonial and imperial powers also have used women's bodies to not only justify invasion, but to present themselves as liberators in the face of a 'backwards' or savage culture (Ahmed-



Ghosh 2008, 100). Women simultaneously contest these gendered norms as they struggle not only for their own rights, but struggle alongside men for broader social change (Jacoby 2005, 5). In these cases women's identity, freedom, and rights become fraught and politicized.

Migration and resettlement also serve to disrupt the identities of immigrant and refugee women and their families (Meertens 2001, 141; Ahmed-Ghosh 2011; Snyder 2011b). New gender roles may have to be negotiated within a family or an individual. In some cases, women may experience a new or increased sense of autonomy, relative to men after immigration (Meertens 2001, 146; Hopkins 2010, 524). The process of migration "disrupts established national, cultural, social and gender norms" as individuals respond to their shifting context in an attempt to maintain previous cultural and national ties, while negotiating membership in a new group (Hopkins 2010, 519). Newcomers must grapple with racism and hostility in the new society, as well as difficulty in obtaining housing and employment, which present additional challenges to previously held identities (Rostami-Povey 2007a, 252; Tomlinson 2010, 279). Changing identities and roles are influenced by the disruption of traditional cultural expectations and the construction of new roles and norms that respond to the new context.

Not only do newcomer and refugee women contend with shifting identities and social contexts as a result of migration, but experiences of violence and trauma have a significant impact on perceptions of identity. Identity concerns may lead to, or escalate violent conflict, while individual and group identities may also be transformed by the experience of conflict (Cook-Huffman 2011, 25). Meanings and perceptions regarding the experience of violence are inextricably intertwined with the dominant social, cultural,

and gendered discourses (Merry 2009, 3; Blackburn 2010, 4). These discourses may result in feelings of shame and self-blame for the traumas women have endured (Blackburn 2010, 5; Yohani and Hagen 2010, 208). Some scholars argue that the assumption or label of resilience often placed on refugee women should be questioned as it may ignore the existence of ongoing domestic violence that some refugee women experience after resettlement (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011, 39). Such a label may place undue pressure on refugee women to cope with past and ongoing trauma without state intervention or support (Ibid., 39).

While the negative impact of war and conflict appears obvious, and certainly deserves continued research, there may also be unintended positive consequences resulting from an experience of conflict. Women may, in fact, experience conflict as empowering due to shifting gender roles (Cordero 2001, 156; Sharoni 2001, 87; Snyder 2011b). An often-cited example of this is the cultural icon of Rosie the Riveter in the United States that represented the economic empowerment of many American women during World War II. In these times of conflict, women may find spaces where they are able to utilize leadership skills, improve literacy and participate in community activism and peacebuilding activities (Kaufman and Williams 2010, 50; Snyder 2011a, 55). Existing norms in the receiving society may influence women to challenge and resist aspects of their culture which they find oppressive, fostering new meanings and understandings associated with social practices (Rostami-Povey 2007a, 249-250). In these ways conflict can also be experienced as constructive, resulting in positive social change.

Changes in social norms, particularly those regarding women's rights and roles in society, have also provoked a backlash among conservatives who argue that women's rights and legal frameworks such as CEDAW promote Western imperialism at the expense of traditional cultural values (Chishti and Farhoumand-Sims 2011). These arguments have been used by extremist groups to justify threats and violence against women and girls (Amnesty International 2011a, 8). Responses to conflict in terms of culture and gender identity are variable and dependent on individual perceptions and social context.

The shifting identities that women experience both as a result of conflict and after migration affect their response to their new social context, including their host community and the existing diasporic community in which they settle (Hopkins 2010, 524). Meanings associated with culture, gender, and identity are fluid and changing; therefore, responses to trauma will not be universal along cultural or gendered lines. Exploring the ways that women react to their changing geographical and social context, along with changing gendered roles and expectations is a valuable contribution of feminist research. The notion that newcomer women, particularly refugee women, are victims or somehow powerless to resist the structures and systems that oppress them must be refuted in favor of exploring the ways that newcomer women promote empowerment and contribute to social change.

### **Community Development and Empowerment**

This research is intended to acknowledge the trauma and suffering women have and continue to experience while focusing on empowerment and the ways in which women use and create support systems to get through difficult times. Research has an

important part to play, not only in uncovering and exploring injustice, but also in contributing to knowledge of existing strength and abilities located within traditionally marginalized communities (Wilson 2008, 109; Snyder 2011b, 45). Literature regarding women who have experienced conflict, migration, and resettlement often discusses methods to support their resilience and empowerment (Cordero 2001, 155-156; Radan 2007, 158; Lykes 2010, 78; Yacoobi 2011). How women exercise their agency and promote empowerment through community development is the focus of this thesis.

Resilience and empowerment are useful concepts to approach responses to structural violence and oppression. Resilience can be described as “a capacity to resist when facing destruction, a positive attitude to life despite adversity and the maintaining of a forward momentum” (Meertens 2001, 134). Empowerment, on the other hand, may be described as a progression to gender equality, or increased ability to overcome obstacles to make choices about one’s life (Lederach 1995, 21; Snyder 2011b, 50). Resilience can be seen as a positive response to oppression or difficulty, in contrast to empowerment, which can be seen as a more transformative outcome; however, resilience may be a mechanism to achieve empowerment in difficult or oppressive situations (Brodsky *et al.* 2011, 218-219).

Rather than viewing resilience or empowerment as solely individual characteristics, it is important to look at the strength that individuals access through established communities and social networks. A community may be defined as a group of people bound by geography or history, or it may be a group of people who share a bond over common interests or values (van der Veen 2003, 581; Eriksson 2011, 405). These conceptions of community can be fleeting; however, as Ruud van der Veen (2003) argues

in her description of “constructed” communities, the bond over shared characteristics may be strengthened or developed in order to attain a goal or to achieve a common purpose (582). The purpose for pursuing community development varies depending on how the group defines their goal.

Van der Veen (2003) describes two approaches to community development: conservative and emancipatory. The conservative approach to community development seeks to strengthen or restore the community in response to a perceived threat to the community’s cohesiveness (Ibid., 582). In the context of migration and resettlement, this approach may take the form of activities intended to nurture aspects of a group’s cultural or ethnic heritage, or maintain ties with a home country or community (Spitzer 2007, 56). The emancipatory approach to community development is more radical in orientation and is focused on grassroots activism that is geared toward political action and social change (van der Veen 2003, 583; Eriksson 2011, 413). Community development by newcomer women may be a mediation between the conservative and emancipatory approaches, as they are constrained by significant structural barriers to well-being while also attempting to negotiate identity and meaning in a shifting cultural context.

Due to the experience of a traumatic event, such as violence or political turmoil, communities may exhibit the adaptive features of resilience in order to move forward and continue to function as a community and cope with the event (Kimhi and Shamaï 2004; Norris *et al.* 2008). These coping strategies may not only serve to support the community during trying periods, but may be an important factor in promoting social change and empowerment. Van der Veen (2003) notes that new social movements connect the global with the local and initiate action with grassroots communities while connecting these

activities with wider transnational processes or issues such as globalization, and environmentalism (590). These processes may also include such transnational issues as migrant worker's rights, human rights, and women's rights.

Service providers and volunteers assist in building resilience through the provision of services and providing space for community-building projects and activities (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011, 45). Some of these services are formal and funded through federal, provincial and municipal programming (George 2002, 467). Yet, many support systems are voluntary associations or personal relationships with members of the community who recognize the need for and utility of such networks (Breton 2001, 25-26; Spitzer, 2007; Eriksson 2011, 411-412). These networks may serve as "survival strategies" for those involved when faced with violence and conflict (Rostami-Povey 2007b, 28-29). Educational programs may also operate as "survival education" in poor communities through "non-formal" services such as job-readiness training and literacy programs that combine practical education with consciousness-raising (van der Veen 2003, 592). This type of survival education may also appear in community-based leisure activities that "serv[e] the cultural and personal development of community members," while encouraging the participation of disenfranchised individuals who may otherwise not access formal educational programs (Ibid., 593). Practices that are rooted in tradition and reflect the history, culture, and context of a group lend sustainability to community and economic development (Phillips and Shockley 2010, 93).

Skills-training and income-generating activities, such as sewing and cooking, provide opportunities for women to network while increasing essential social and economic capital necessary to cope with conflict and oppression (Rostami-Povey 2007b,

32; Lehr 2011; Tursunova 2011). Activities that allow individuals to come together and talk or share stories – explicitly in the case of storytelling, or implicitly through networking while doing another task – support the strengthening of cultural capital in a community (Philips and Shockley 2010, 99). Storytelling is a meaningful activity that raises awareness of issues that may be hidden or cloaked by a culture of silence, and may connect individual experiences that are shared by other group members producing a sense of solidarity (Senehi 2011, 204). This can strengthen communities, build bonds among the members, and promote intercultural dialogue and understanding (Ghorayshi 2010, 100). Furthermore, networking and sharing stories can be a form of empowerment and source of peacebuilding through the dissemination of knowledge and the formation of solidarity among people facing similar challenges (Snyder 2003, 13).

### **Asset-Based Community Development**

Empowerment and agency can be supported through community development projects that come from the grassroots, and are driven by the abilities and strengths of the community. A collective approach to empowerment can produce both social capital and individual strength and resiliency through the valuing of the members' abilities. This may encourage engagement in other forms of activism and social change (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 4). Asset-based community development (ABCD) “is intended to affirm, and to build upon the remarkable work already going on in neighborhoods” (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 9). A web of support exists even in communities that have experienced significant hardship and may be utilized by newcomer women looking for space to connect with others, heal, and forge strength and empowerment.

Asset-based community development takes a strength-based approach and considers capacities that may otherwise be overlooked or undervalued, such as volunteer work (Mathie and Puntenney 2009, 11; Harris *et al.*, 2007). These strength and asset-based approaches are particularly useful for researching the concepts of resilience and empowerment among populations that are marginalized or have experienced significant violence and hardship (Denborough *et al.* 2006). David Denborough *et al.* (2006) discuss the positive impact of sharing stories of success within a community which is experiencing hard times (20). Knowledge of successful initiatives helps make visible the existence and impact of the programs, and may strengthen them through support and recognition (Ibid.). Sources of community support and inclusion are extremely important determinants in the mental health and well-being of immigrant and refugee women in Canada (Hyman 2011, 106).

The central purpose of asset-based community development is to recognize and support the abilities and assets that exist in a community rather than focusing solely on deficits or needs. Community-building projects often begin with the creation of an inventory of community needs. ABCD approaches, on the other hand, begin with the creation of an inventory of “community capital” that includes the various capacities and abilities held by individuals, groups, and institutions in the community (Green 2010a, 6). This approach is particularly useful in identifying skills held by members of the community who are traditionally marginalized (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6) or pushed out of decision-making positions by members of the community with more power (Norquay 2004, 39). These unutilized or unrecognized skills may include work that is traditionally associated with women, such as childcare, cooking, and sewing. Activities



that are not highly remunerated in the labour market, yet are vital to the functioning of a community.

The deficit-based approach to community-building can lead to the internalization of a negative identity in which the group's needs or problems outweigh their perceived abilities to meet these needs, rendering them dependent and disempowered at both the community and individual level (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 27). The negative labeling of people who have high needs, including those who may be experiencing mental health problems, have experienced significant trauma, or are living in poverty, creates a barrier for individuals who have internalized this label to recognize their ability to contribute to positive social change (Ibid.). Recognizing and utilizing the assets and strengths within the community empowers the group by challenging these disempowering narratives (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 10).

While focusing on the assets and strengths of a community may support their empowerment, practitioners must be aware of the potential for the creation of dependence. Lederach (1995) argues that the prescriptive model of training creates a dependence on the technology and expertise of the outsider. In the context of community development, the prescriptive model is similar to approaches to development driven by external 'experts.' This approach is unsustainable and may not address the root causes of conflict. Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) warn that overemphasis on the label of 'resilient' to describe newcomer and refugee communities may result in the reduction or withdrawal of government funding (39). Reductions in federal and state funding place the responsibility for addressing community needs at the local level, resulting in groups becoming reliant on the scarce funding available (Green 2010a, 2).

Supporters of ABCD suggest that while these activities often use or require some level of outside support, utilizing assets and abilities at the grassroots level reduces their dependence and strengthens the sustainability of the activities themselves (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6; Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 7). By strengthening social capital in the community, both the community and the individual may become empowered without placing the onus for this positive change on the individuals who are attempting to navigate the difficult transition of immigration and resettlement (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011).

### **Gender and Grassroots Leadership**

Local leaders or individuals who have been empowered in the community can act as “catalysts” for community development by recognizing the assets and potential within the community and fostering a sense of pride among members in their abilities (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 1). Recent scholarship has indicated the importance of peacebuilding and development projects at the grassroots level. Middle-level leaders, including ethnic or religious leaders, academics, and NGO workers, play an important role in peacebuilding activities and are the “strategic link” between policy-makers in top-level leadership positions and the local community (Lederach 1997, 58). Grassroots leadership is key in delivering services that address trauma in a manner appropriate to the context (Ibid., 55).

An elicitive framework is used to create programs in consultation with local elites and service providers that utilize resources existing within communities which reflect a particular context to build capacity from the grassroots (Lederach 1995, 66; Lehr 2011, 260). Through the asset-based community development approach, community members

become aware of the breadth of the assets that exist by gathering together and telling stories of successes, even small ones, that allow them to create an inventory of their human, social, and economic capital, that encourages a sense of strength and purpose among members (Mathie and Cunningham 2003; Snyder 2011a, 17).

Programs developed and implemented by individuals rooted in a particular community bridge the gap between “a top-down program seeking to be culturally sensitive[...] and a locally controlled program that recognizes the complexity of local cultural ideas” (Merry 2006, 164). Local leaders and other empowered individuals have an important role to play in linking top-level goals of social change with local-level needs of social and economic development. In his influential book, *Preparing for Peace*, Lederach (1995) notes the importance of rooting conflict resolution training in the cultural context that it is intended to operate in, rather than using a prescriptivist approach that is rooted in the Western worldview. The elicitive approach described by Lederach (1995) and indigenous peacemaking theory as proposed by numerous PACS scholars (e.g. Zartman 2000; Mac Ginty 2008) has been extremely useful for practitioners wishing to decolonize their practice and support grassroots-led conflict resolution and development.

Along with culture, it is also important to consider gendered dynamics in both the assessment of abilities and needs in a community. Norquay (2004) explains that local leadership is often appropriated by men, which may result in the “silencing of voices speaking from gendered, generational, and class-based positions” (39). Asset-based community development and Lederach’s (1995) elicitive model can be utilized to ensure that women’s voices are heard, and that they are empowered along with other members

of the community. Women, minorities, and others who may not hold positions of power in the community may be able to identify resources and assets that are otherwise overlooked (Green 2010b, 181).

Community leadership provided by women who share similar experiences and cultural background may provide familiarity and engender community-based resilience and strength (Bishop 1994; Spitzer 2007; Pulvirenti and Mason 2011). Services and community groups organized by women who have experiences similar to their participants may provide the benefit of being rooted in a common culture or worldview. Women's own experiences of violence and conflict can provide them with a greater appreciation of the institutional oppressions women are faced with, along with a practical understanding of their day-to-day challenges (Anderlini 2000, 14).

Women's activism and pursuit of social change can sometimes be seen as a threat to social cohesion and the status quo (Norquay 2004, 33). Yet, women can utilize "invisible spaces" that adhere to traditional or socially acceptable forms of women's engagement such as sewing and cooking groups, to explore and challenge cultural norms, while building social and economic capital for the community (Ibid., 2, 46-47). These types of community building activities operate in the form of constrained, or everyday empowerment and resistance described earlier. These activities create space for dialogue and social change, are grounded in the grassroots, and respond to the abilities and assets in the community.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Canadian Immigration: History, Experiences, and Challenges**

Immigration to Canada is influenced by global systems and international crises. Both the refugee and migrant experience that drive people to leave their home countries and pursue immigration are gendered. Immigrant women experience barriers and forms of structural and direct violence that are related to their gender. For those who chose Canada, or have had Canada chosen for them by an immigration agent, these challenges are often followed by economic and social difficulties in their new home cities. Despite these structural barriers and forms of oppression and discrimination, newcomer women exercise their agency and promote positive social change in their communities. These dynamics can be seen in the Winnipeg context where many refugees and migrants make their home in the inner-city and downtown. While living in the downtown area may present certain challenges, it may also be a space for the creation of community-based empowerment and social change.

#### **Historical Context of Canadian Immigration**

Canadian history is punctuated by waves and shifts in immigration policy over time. These policies have often focused on attracting migrants and immigrants to contribute to Canada's economic prosperity. Walsh (2008) notes that the colonial history of Canada has been "built, founded, and defined by mass migration" (792). Globally, Canada, the United States, and Australia are considered to be the three "nations of immigration" (Reitz 2012, 518). Early forms of Canadian immigration policy were geared toward the colonization of sparsely populated regions of the country by European

immigrants. These immigrants were intended to settle the West, often displacing Aboriginal people from their land, while promoting economic growth, and “strengthen[ing] the nation’s British cultural foundations” (Mancuso 2011, 6). Until the mid-twentieth century, British immigrants were actively recruited and desired as it was seen that they were key to economic and cultural strength. This policy was influenced by fears of threats to the British character and culture of Canada, should there be a presence of non-British newcomers to the country (Ibid., 7-8). These fears reflect the racist and discriminatory nature of Canada’s early immigration policy (George 2002, 466; Spitzer 2011a, 10).

After World War II, Canada continued to aggressively pursue immigration policies that would provide social and economic benefits for the country. Following the war, Canada’s immigration policy continued to focus on white European immigrants to the exclusion or restriction of people outside of this narrow focus (Walsh 2008, 795). These discriminatory policies began to change in the 1960s with the adoption of the points system that focused on the potential economic contributions that could be made by applicants (Ibid., 796; Reitz 2012, 523). Immigration policy began to focus on three large categories of applicants: the economic class of immigrants who would be assessed by the points system, the social class who are sponsored by their family members, and humanitarian class who come to Canada as refugees under the Geneva Convention and Protocol (Ghosh and Pyrcce 1999, 236; George 2002, 466). Under these classes Canada accepted 248,748 new permanent residents in 2011 (CIC 2012b). Of this, 62% were economic immigrants and 11% were refugees (Ibid.). Through the combination of these

programs, immigrants from non-European countries now outweigh Europeans in terms of numbers (George 2002, 466).

The increasing importance of human rights and humanitarian assistance as evidenced in international treaties and declarations, such as the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the *1967 Protocol*, place an onus on countries such as Canada to respond to humanitarian crisis through a variety of means, including refugee resettlement (Walsh 2008, 796; CIC, 2009, 13). Canada is now second only to the United States in admitting refugees for resettlement (UNHCR 2011b, 7). In 2011, Canada admitted a total of 12,946 government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees; of this number, 6,393 or 49%, were women (CIC 2012b). As Canada participates annually in the resettlement of refugees, the Canadian context is informed by wider global trends in refugee migration and conflicts abroad. These experiences of violence and conflict, as well as the refugee experience itself, are gendered. Women experience gender-based violence during conflict, as well as in the course of becoming, and as a result of, being a refugee.

The global refugee population is influenced by historical and ongoing conflict, identity-based persecution, and natural disasters, among other factors. In 2010, the total number of displaced persons was estimated to be 43.3 million people globally (UNHCR 2011b, 12). More than one third of these displaced persons (15.4 million) are refugees who have fled their countries of origin, while the majority of the displaced remain within their own countries. Almost one third of all refugees in the world originate from Afghanistan, followed by Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Myanmar (Ibid., 27). In 2010, high numbers of Afghans continued to be forced from their

homes as the internally displaced reach over 350,000 people, and 2.3 million Afghans live abroad in refugee camps (Amnesty International 2011b, 57; UNHCR 2011b, 6). The majority of Afghan refugees flee to neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran (Amnesty International 2011b, 57), with Pakistan hosting the largest number of refugees of refugees in the world, the vast majority of whom originate from Afghanistan (UNHCR 2011b, 26).

For those refugees who remain outside of their country of origin resettlement to a third country is one of the three durable solutions available. The other two durable solutions are voluntary repatriation and local integration. Few refugees are able to benefit from resettlement due, in part, to a lack of state participation in refugee resettlement programs. Approximately 50% of registered refugees are living in protracted refugee situations, having spent over five years in exile (UNHCR 2011a, 60). The dangers and difficulties associated with living in refugee camps have been well documented; however, the living situation of refugees is changing as more are taking refuge outside of camp settings. In 2010, about half of all refugees were living outside of camps (Ibid., 59). Refugees living in urban areas outside of established camps face many challenges including violence, harassment and lack of support from official organizations (Wagacha and Guiney, 95).

Recent data from UNHCR (2011b) indicates that of the total global refugee population, women comprise slightly less than half (47). UNHCR attempts to provide services to refugees under their mandate and have highlighted the difficulty in providing such services as education, particularly for refugee women and girls (UNHCR 2011b, 49-



50). The challenges associated with providing services and protection to refugees are myriad, and it is refugee populations themselves that must cope with the consequences.

In recent years more attention is being paid to the impact that conflict, war, and refugee situations have specifically on women. UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, acknowledges the widespread existence of gender-based violence in armed conflict, as well as the important contributions of women in peace-building, and calls for the UN and member states to promote gender equality, and protect the inherent human rights of women (UNSC 2000). Resolutions such as 1325 attempt to bring attention to violence committed against women in conflict situations, as well as recognize the agency and role of women in decision-making and peace-building. These resolutions have been made in light of such atrocities as the systemic use of rape during the Rwandan genocide (Merry 2009, 166) and Bosnian war (Baines 2004, 106) and the widespread gender-based violence that occurred in apartheid South Africa (Borer *et al.* 2006, 36). Women are not only targeted with violence during armed conflict, but remain vulnerable to gender-based violence after they have fled conflict zones.

After being displaced all refugees must deal with stress and trauma associated with their experiences in conflict, as well as abuses and suffering they may experience in their country of asylum, and possibly their final country of resettlement. Refugee women often continue to be targeted with gender-based violence even after they have fled their home countries (Lykes 2010, 75; Leatherman 2011, 102). Women have been victimized by sexual violence committed by both men residing in refugee camps, as well as by aid workers (Olsen and Scharffscher 2004, 381) and face high levels of domestic violence in refugee settings (Nowrojee 2008, 125). Due to the prevalence of gender-based violence

and sexual violence, refugee women must face the multiple traumas associated with conflict and displacement, as well as being targeted with violence and persecution due to their sex or gender.

Refugees, particularly refugee women, face significant hardship prior to coming to Canada, then barriers to well-being after they have resettled. Yet, women immigrating to Canada under economic or family classes also face difficulty and gendered discrimination. The push-pull model, describes the calculus that some migrants make in choosing to pursue immigration: they are pushed away from their home countries due to poor living standards, while being pulled to the receiving country by the desire for a better life (Ghosh and Pyrcie 1999, 233-4). Immigrants may also be ‘pulled’ to a new country by the desire to live with relatives who have already settled abroad, while refugees are more commonly ‘pushed’ from their countries to escape war and violence (Ahmed-Ghosh 2011, 243). The calculus of ‘push and pull’ that individual migrants and refugees consider may have an important impact on their experiences and perceptions of their new home.

In 2011, the highest proportion of new permanent residents in Canada came from the Philippines, numbering 34,991 (CIC 2012b). Within Canada, Winnipeg, Manitoba is a primary destination for many Filipino immigrants (Vachon and Toews 2008). Over the past number of decades Filipino immigration to Canada has reflected the outcome of policies that have sought workers for “gendered employment” including nursing and care work as numbers of Filipino immigrants have skewed heavily female (Ibid., 109; Spitzer 2011a, 11). In 1995, the Domestic Workers Program was established to “address the shortage of workers who were prepared to accept low-wage work” (George 2002, 466).

While these programs provide opportunities for immigration to Canada (the pull factor), they are also indicative of a patriarchal system that devalues work that has traditionally been associated with women. Migrants may not be ‘pushed’ out of their home countries in the same way as refugees, yet they also experience some negative consequences of being ‘pulled’ to Canada.

### **After Arrival: Experiences in Canada**

In the analysis of the experiences of newcomer women it is important to locate and discuss the ways that these experiences are gendered and the challenges that newcomer women face after they come to Canada, but it is also important to note the agency of women and the ways that they create space for positive social change. Various theories have been developed to describe the process of immigrant settlement and adjustment. George (2002) describes adjustment to immigration as taking place on a continuum where immediate needs such as language acquisition and housing are eventually supplanted by concerns regarding participation and representation in social and political activities (470). Newcomer women navigate numerous barriers to well-being in the years after they arrive in Canada. Some navigate these experiences on their own, while many utilize community and social support to make the transition.

Immigration programs are devised to provide a benefit for Canadian society both economically and socially, while benefitting individual immigrants with an ostensibly improved quality of life and set of opportunities. Yet, many newcomers experience difficulty after their arrival in Canada. Spitzer (2011b) notes that immigrant women in Canada are particularly vulnerable to “downward economic and social mobility” (25). This reflects the overall decline in earning potential and employment opportunities

experienced by new immigrants, even those who come to Canada under the skilled worker class, due to institutional barriers such as the “shift to the ‘knowledge economy’ and increased credentialism” (Reitz 2012, 532-3). Lack of recognition of professional women’s credentials after immigration to Canada places a further barrier on their ability to support themselves and their families (Samuel 2009, 23). When their credentials are not recognized, women tend to take on “survival jobs” that are low-paying, provide few benefits and are insecure (Spitzer 2011b, 28).

Institutional barriers such as these are exacerbated by racial discrimination in housing and employment that contribute to poverty among immigrant families (Reitz 2012, 534). These barriers, along with others such as language ability, mental health, trauma, and social exclusion have a significant impact on a newcomer’s overall health and well-being (Newbold 2010, 28). Newcomer women may experience these barriers differently, in a gendered manner, as their access to health and social services may be limited by “family, job, or cultural expectations and roles” (Ibid., 29). Gender roles and expectations related to their identities as wives and mothers may place certain responsibilities on women, such as childcare or care for elderly family members, which can lead to isolation.

Economic barriers to well-being are experienced alongside social factors that have a negative impact on newcomer women after their arrival in Canada. Immigrant and refugee women often experience separation from their family members (Spitzer 2011b, 31), and are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence, which contribute to experiences of depression (Newbold 2010, 30). Ahmed-Ghosh (2011) states that a major difficulty experienced by Afghan newcomers is the breakdown in community and the

“kinship system” after immigration (243). Familiar support systems are disrupted or lost as families and communities are separated. These changes create significant difficulties for newcomer women who are negotiating various social and economic changes, without access to traditional sources of support.

Other forms of hardship experienced by newcomer women include “acculturative stress”, or culture shock, that is sometimes experienced by newcomers who are navigating the new cultural context, while attempting to blend new cultural influences of the host society with their own (Samuel 2009). One form of this culture shock is intergenerational conflict between parents and their children. Conflict can result in families where children experience adaptation to Canadian society at a different pace, and in different ways than their parents (Ibid., 21). In Samuel’s (2009) study of South Asian immigrant women in Atlantic Canada, some participants described their children as being embarrassed by them due their English language abilities and the “cultural lag in values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms between generations” (21-22). Spitzer (2011b) refers to the disappointment and disillusionment at the barriers to well-being experienced by newcomer women as a “weariness” that can present itself both emotionally and physically (32). While these challenges are significant, newcomer women utilize a variety of means to cope with, and overcome some of these barriers.

### **Newcomer Women’s Activism and Agency**

Some Canadian studies have described the ways that newcomer women gather and create space for social change and community support for women experiencing difficulty associated with their experiences of migration and resettlement. Norquay’s (2004) study of the Afghan Women’s Association in Toronto describes the ways that

staff, volunteers, and clients of the organization interact and create a space for dialogue, sharing, and support. He contends that, “the involvement of immigrants through volunteerism creates spaces for cross-cultural exchanges and for building social capital, quite apart from the planned outcomes of the formally sanctioned programs” (Norquay 2004, 2). Newcomer women from Afghanistan participate in this organization and receive settlement support and training, but they also have opportunities to challenge and negotiate aspects of their culture and identity within a safe space, surrounded by other women who are going through, or have previously gone through similar experiences and challenges (Ibid.).

A study by Torres *et al.* (2011) elucidates the ways that Latin American women in Ottawa pursue empowerment through community development. Many women in this study initiated or participated in community-based organizations and initiatives that were oriented to the empowerment of women in their community. Yet, many of these same women faced challenges within their roles as community leaders and agents of change that related to gendered barriers such as their role as family care-givers and structural barriers in the community such as racism and sexism (Torres *et al.* 2011, 210). The authors conclude that community empowerment must not only focus on women’s individual empowerment, but empowerment for the whole community “acting together to gain power, remove barriers, build healthier communities, and thus be able to participate fully in Canadian society” (Ibid., 212). Newcomer women’s involvement in this pursuit is essential to achieve a level of social justice for the entire community. These two examples illustrate some of the work that is being done by newcomer women in cities

across the country to address structural barriers to well-being through grassroots community building.

### **Winnipeg: Challenges and Spaces for Social Change**

This study is located in the central Canadian city of Winnipeg, in Manitoba, a province that receives a high number of newcomers in proportion to the overall population per year. While Winnipeg has a relatively small population of less than 700,000 people (Statistics Canada 2013), it continues to be an important destination for both refugees and other classes of newcomers each year. Annually, Manitoba receives a significant number of resettled refugees through the government and privately sponsored refugee programs. From 2005 to 2011, Manitoba received 7,907 resettled refugees, with a total of 1,303 resettled refugees in 2011 alone (CIC 2012b). As well, according to the 2011 census, 38,415 Winnipeggers responded that their mother tongue was Tagalog, suggesting the Filipino newcomers comprise over 5% of the population in the city, and almost 24% of the population whose first language is not English or French (Statistics Canada 2013). The global and the local converge in this small city where individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences immigrate and attempt to build new lives. After arrival in Canada, some individuals and families must cope with prior experiences of trauma and difficulty, while navigating a new social, political, and geographic context.

Downtown Winnipeg is frequently a focal point for newcomers and refugees moving into the province (Vachon and Toews 2008, 118). The downtown is a very diverse area in Winnipeg as along with newcomers it also is home to a high percentage of Aboriginal people (Ghorayshi 2010, 93). In Ghorayshi's (2010) study of Winnipeg's downtown, her respondents – both newcomers and Aboriginal people – reported that they

chose to live downtown for a number of reasons including “centrality of location, access to services, lack of transportation, being close to the members of their own community, and the fact that the inner city is the site of many subsidized housing units and a space where they find affordable rental accommodation” (Ibid.). While subsidized housing is helpful for individuals and families who are experiencing declining socio-economic status and poverty, accessing it can also “lead to ghettoization and isolation of a marginalized group” (Carter *et al.* 2009, 308). In their study of refugee housing circumstances in Winnipeg, Carter *et al.* (2009) found that the majority of the study participants were living in the inner-city area, and though they appreciated many of the above qualities of the neighborhood, many of them wished to move to a new location within the first few years after their arrival in the city due to safety concerns (315).

Many of the women I spoke with for this study do their work in a few areas in Winnipeg, particularly in the downtown and North End areas. Selina<sup>3</sup> explained the significance of downtown to many newcomers, “Central Park is a unique place. It’s like a hub. People come and spend two or three years, once they get established and they’re confident, they move into another community. Then the new refugee or immigrants come and they stay for two or three years and then they move.” Another participant, Salimah, spoke about the benefits of working and living downtown, but also mentioned some of the difficulties that they face in this location:

There is [a newcomer settlement organization] just down the street. And [the] downtown area, [there is] all immigrants over there. Newcomers prefer downtown.

Even myself, I didn’t recognize what kind of problem [there was], but I was very happy when they gave me a house, an apartment, beside the school. And I could access anywhere [by] walking. Everything around me. And I was very happy because my children were small at the time. But when they reached teenage, and I

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<sup>3</sup> All participants’ names are pseudonymous. Please see Chapter 3, page 51 for more information regarding the study participants.



recognized what kind of a problem with gangsters [pause]. [There was] suffering.  
(Salimah)

While Ghorayshi (2010) notes that the inner-city is a “space of concentrated racialized poverty,” it is also a space where community-based empowerment has taken root through the creation of community-based organizations that serve Aboriginal populations and those that cater to the needs of newcomers (94). Some community organizations in the inner-city have been promoting intercultural dialogue and the creation of “inter-cultural spaces” that allow people to “connect across the divides of difference” to promote social change and inclusion (Ibid., 100). These spaces are important to not only increase access to social networks, but to break down stereotypes and stigma that are the basis of discrimination and social exclusion.

Newcomers to Winnipeg face similar challenges as those who immigrate to other cities in Canada. These challenges include lack of recognition of credentials, poverty, difficulty finding affordable housing, discrimination, and acculturative stress or culture shock (Magro and Ghorayshi 2011). Women face diminished access to educational programming due to their competing responsibilities related to their gender roles as wives and mothers (Ibid., 18). As well, due to the size of the city, newcomers also contend with the smaller representation of ethnic and cultural groups, which reduces the availability of a social support network that is culture-specific (Carter *et al.* 2009, 310). Magro and Ghorayshi (2011) reported that many of the newcomers they spoke with in their Winnipeg study experienced significant difficulty and challenges in their day-to-day lives, but also exhibited characteristics of resilience and optimism for the future (12). Some participants in their study contributed to the promotion of social change in their communities through participation in community activities and activism (Ibid., 12-13).

Newcomers also access service providers such as Neighborhood Immigrant Settlement Workers located in regions throughout the city in order to access guidance, social support, and expand their social network (Cooper 2013).

While newcomers to Winnipeg face numerous challenges and barriers to well-being, there also exists space to collaborate and create community-based empowerment. The focus of this study is on how newcomer and refugee women create these spaces and identify not only the challenges or needs of the community, but support and strengthen the capacities and abilities that newcomer women bring with them. The participants describe their communities, their roles, and their concerns and goals for the future. Identifying the challenges that newcomer women face is extremely important in order to understand their individual and systemic barriers to well-being, but it is equally important to recognize the strengths and assets that exist in communities and can be supported through grassroots initiatives.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methodology: Approaches Rooted in Respect**

To get a sense of the lived realities of immigrant and refugee women who facilitate and organize community activities with other newcomer women, this study utilized a qualitative methodology, grounded in approaches to research derived from PACS and feminist literature. Much of PACS literature criticizes top-down approaches to development and peacebuilding (Lederach 1995, 68; Mac Ginty 2008). Semi-structured and narrative interviews allow the research to be guided by participants, showing respect for their knowledge and insights. These methods are in line with feminist methodology that is in tune to issues surrounding voice, power, and inequality in the construction of knowledge and research. The methodology of the research chosen for this project is consistent with the study's focus on empowerment and grassroots-level social change. This section will discuss these methodological issues, and will describe some of the experiences of putting these theories into practice.

### **Methodological Approaches**

As voice and local knowledge play such a powerful role in PACS and feminist literature (Lederach 1995; Senehi 2011, 204; Flaherty 2012), this project utilizes a qualitative methodology focusing on semi-structured and narrative interviews. Rich description and detail as well as excerpts from interviews assist in describing the perspectives and lives of those interviewed (Bogdan and Biklen 2003, 5). The research process must center on respect for participants, their knowledge and perspectives, as well as the meaning and value they ascribe to a given phenomenon (Lederach 1995, 30; Pinnegar and Daynes 2007, 9). The idea of the objectivity of the researcher is questioned,

in favor of acknowledging the social construction of knowledge and the biases and assumptions implicit in the worldviews of the researcher and researched (Okolie 2005, 242; Pinnegar and Daynes 2007, 11). In a scholar-activist approach, as seen in Lederach's (1995) elicitive model, "cross-cultural and cross-experience exchanges" (67) can lead to mutual learning through empowerment and respect. A feminist methodology aims to consider power dynamics and the social location of both the participants and the researcher with the ultimate goal of confronting inequality and oppression (Doucet and Mauthner 2008, 337; Ackerly and True 2010, 2). This approach not only favors the voices of the participants, but also connects the study with the importance of storytelling to the PACS field (Senehi 2011).

Central to a mutual learning approach is the inclusion of participants in the creation of knowledge. This is achieved by showing respect for the participants' knowledge and perspective, and ensuring that their voices are accurately interpreted and represented. An important contribution of feminist methodology is the acknowledgement that the researcher has a particular worldview or epistemology that may not be shared by those participating in the research (Ackerly and True 2010, 25). This recognition ultimately shapes the questions asked, what is understood as 'fact' or 'knowledge,' along with conclusions drawn from the research. Storytelling and critical reflection, as well as sharing and owning knowledge with the participants, can form a collaborative approach to minimize misperception and misrepresentation (Max 2005, 87; Ackerly and True 2010, 257). This approach allows the researcher to conceive of herself as a student or learner, rather than expert, and the participants as "theorists of their own everyday lives" (Dei 2005, 5-6). Utilization of this methodology will not eliminate the oppressive

qualities of cross-cultural study, though, if utilized deftly, it may mitigate some of the impact of power imbalance.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews influenced by narrative theory, research can “reveal the social reality,” of the study participants (Neuman 2012, 360-361). These methods allow the researcher to capture the complexity of their experiences and their perceptions of the challenges and strengths that exist in their communities. Andrew C. Okolie (2005) states that interventive in-depth interviewing as a dialectical process, addresses cultural difference and the interlocking intersectionality of oppression, without the assumption of the objectivity or universality of the researcher’s perspective (242). Through this approach, the researcher engages the participants in a dialogue, with an explicit focus on the participant’s interpretation of their experiences. The researcher then attempts to interpret the narrative in the “wider sociohistorical and political context” (Ibid.) and evaluates this interpretation in consultation with the participants (Ackerly and True 2010, 189). This is a holistic approach that promotes an emancipatory, empowering experience as a part of participation in research, rather than a disinterested gathering of ‘facts’ (Okolie 2005, 249). This methodology reflects the multi-disciplinary basis of the PACS field and the researcher’s worldview, which is informed by feminist research practices.

Participation in the study may promote a sense of self-reflection and empowerment through the respect accorded to the voice and knowledge of those engaged in the research (Josselson 2007, 543). The methods chosen for this study, including semi-structured and narrative interviewing, and the sharing themes and analysis with participants, is intended to offset the negative impact of potential exposure to emotional

or psychological stress, along with negative influences of any potential power imbalance. The use of open questions allows women to divulge only information that they feel comfortable and safe sharing (Khan 2005, 2029). Participating in the research may not directly benefit individual participants; however, increasing knowledge about the experiences of women in similar contexts may have a wider net benefit (Josselson 2007, 555). The information gathered in the course of the study will help to address the gap in research regarding gender and conflict, and women's agency. By expanding our understanding of how women cope, and find healing and strength, communities may be more responsive to their needs in pursuit of social justice.

In addition to a feminist methodology based on the methods of semi-structured and narrative-based interviews, the study is also guided by a strength-based approach. By focusing on what is working within each community, this research attempts to move away from a focus on deficits to one focused on assets (Fisher and Anushko 2008, 104). Denborough *et al.* (2006) discuss the positive impact of sharing stories of success within a community that is experiencing hard times (2006, 20). Other methodological approaches, such as appreciative inquiry, indicate the empowering nature of focusing on strengths and achievement, rather than needs and problems, in community-building and development (Elliott 1999). The methodology for this study is also influenced by asset-based community development approaches (Kretzmann and McKnight 1994; Mathie and Cunningham 2003) that seek to empower communities by focusing on existing assets, not merely needs or challenges. Discussing the ways that community members help each other helps illuminate structural barriers that need to change to allow these activities to be more effective (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 6; Mathie and Puntenney 2009, 5).

Interviewing community leaders sheds light on the “key role played by formal and informal associations, networks, and extended families at the community level” in community-building projects (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, 7). These approaches do not deny that challenges exist, but rather affirm and value the abilities and capacities that often are overlooked, an approach that is particularly useful for considering women’s agency. A methodology informed by feminist and PACS theory allow this project to not only expand the knowledge of newcomer women, but also allow the process of data gathering to be a potentially empowering experience for the participants themselves.

### **Theory in Practice**

Putting into practice the qualitative methodology and methods outlined above required a certain amount of flexibility. First, the researcher needed to be flexible in defining the scope of the study due to realities encountered in the process of conducting fieldwork. While some expected participants were not able or interested in participating in the study, there were also responses from potential participants who were outside the initial scope of the study who wished to tell their stories and have input. The inclusion of these voices proved invaluable to the research process.

Flexibility is also required as a requisite for the methods of semi-structured and narrative interviewing. These chosen methods are intended to allow the study participants to guide the conversation and tell the stories and describe the experiences that they find most important. Finally, the process of planning the interviews and conducting the analysis requires transparency and flexibility to ensure the inclusion of the participants in the process, and to address potential sources of negative power dynamics in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. This section describes my

experience with putting this methodology and these research methods into practice along with some of the difficulties and successes experienced along the way. The section concludes with a brief description of the process of data analysis undertaken for this study.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were immigrant and refugee women working as organizers and facilitators of community activities in Winnipeg, Manitoba. These women came from a variety of backgrounds and work or volunteer primarily with newcomer women (some groups included men, though even in these groups women represented the majority of the participants). Twelve women were interviewed and came from the following countries: Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Trinidad. The women have lived in Canada in wide ranging time periods, from two to twenty years. The women were also diverse in terms of age, range from twenty to sixty years old, with the average age being approximately thirty-five to forty years old. These women organized such variable activities as arts and crafts groups, conversation circles, cooking groups, sewing groups, skills training, community education classes, and advocacy. The women reported very different life experiences, some coming from more privileged upbringings, others having direct experiences of violence and conflict. Each woman brought a unique perspective to the study though many themes and similarities were identified among these interviews.

In order to provide privacy to the participants their real names are not used in the study. Rather, they are referred to by pseudonyms chosen at random by the researcher. The participants have been made aware of their pseudonym by email, and had the



opportunity to change it to another name if they wished. Details of the participants such as their age, nationality, or time spent in Canada are not described in the thesis unless the participants themselves mentioned this information in their interview. Personal data was not requested from the participants in order to avoid putting pressure on the participants to speak about personal life experiences if they did not wish to share this information about themselves. Quotes have been shared with the participants by email to ensure that they are comfortable with the information that is divulged about themselves.

Purposive sampling can be used to identify key informants in the field (Silverman 2010, 141). This sampling began with individuals who work or volunteer in this capacity in Winnipeg with local immigrant settlement organizations and networks. Through snowball sampling (Bogdan and Biklen 2003, 64), key informants are able to identify other potential participants from their social or professional network (Silverman 2010, 194). While this sampling is not scientific, nor representative, it illuminates the perspectives of immigrant and refugee women regarding their lived realities. This is significant, as gendered perspectives are still marginalized within research and theory (Sandole-Staroste 2011). Valuing these perspectives are reflective of PACS and feminist methodologies.

In the first few months of my research I modified the scope of the study participants. At the beginning I intended to focus solely on Afghan women working and volunteering in this field. I planned to interview Afghan women in a number of cities across Canada by contacting settlement agencies in the major cities, including those that focused solely on the Afghan community in that particular city. I would make contact with key informants in these organizations who would be able to recommend potential

participants. Unfortunately, I found few agencies that were interested in participating, or were willing to recommend potential participants. I felt, without meeting these people face to face, that they did not wish to take on extra work into their already busy schedules.

After deliberation with my committee, I decided to widen the scope of the population to include former refugee women from a variety of backgrounds who organize and facilitate community activities with newcomer women. After widening the scope I received more interest from women in Winnipeg and moved forward with conducting interviews. The coordinator for a newcomer advocacy and information network in Winnipeg agreed to distribute the description of my project and call for participants in their email mailing list. The majority of the study participants were identified through this network.

Spitzer (2007) notes that while it can be useful, in some ways, to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary migrants, people's lived experiences do not always fit so neatly into these categories (61). One participant emailed me and expressed her interest in participating after receiving the forwarded email from the newcomer advocacy mailing list. I met with her in her office downtown and described the project and had her tell me a little bit about herself. She stated that she was not a refugee, she had immigrated to Canada under one of the economic classes of immigrants, but she worked with newcomer women in her community who were facing a variety of challenges including both structural and direct forms of violence.

There were some distinctions from the challenges that were being reported by refugee women, yet the newcomer women she worked with were also coping with

isolation, domestic violence, depression, economic challenges, and coping with aspects of a disrupted, or changing identity. I felt that the study would benefit from the inclusion of her voice and perspective, and with the consultation of my committee, I once again widened the scope of the study. In total, I met with four women who came to Canada as immigrants and eight who came to Canada as refugees. I believe the perspectives and insights gained from these participants were invaluable to the study.

### **Data Sources – Semi-Structured and Narrative Interviewing**

Consent was requested from the participants to meet for at least one ninety-minute interview each. The actual length of the interviews varied between forty minutes to over two hours. Semi-structured and narrative interviews are used in order to create an inductive process so the data gathering does not conform solely to the researcher's preconceived expectations (Ackerly and True 2010, 168). Open-ended questions allow participants to draw from their professional, practical and autobiographical experiences, informing the content of the research. As the chosen methods of this research are semi-structured and narrative interviewing, the research instruments include a set of general and probing questions that were used to guide the conversation between the participant and researcher. Narrative projects are "loosely designed" as "narrative understanding is emergent," thus questions and information arose during course of the interviews that could not have been predicted by the researcher (Josselson 2007, 557). The interview questions focus on the participants' experiences and reflections about their work with newcomer women, and their perceptions about challenges and strengths in their community.

Most interviews were conducted in suitable locations such as in quiet offices or boardrooms, however a few interviews were conducted in public locations that were busy and loud. In these instances, I shared coffee or tea, or occasionally food, with the interviewee while we talked. I connected with all of the participants by email, except for one, prior to meeting with them. The email included basic information about the study. When I met with the women, I brought along an Informed Consent form so we could go over it and I could answer any questions that the women had about the study, or about their role, should they decide to participate. Each time, I asked the women if they would like to meet again at another date to do the interview, so they would have time to decide if they wanted to participate, or if they wished to do the interview immediately.

One of the ethical considerations in this study was that of power dynamics between the participants and the researcher. The participants' perceptions of the researcher may have an impact on those willing to participate both in their decision to participate and in the information they divulge. Power imbalance can lead to exploitation and objectification in the research process (hooks 1999; Mohanty 2003; Khan 2005, 2027). This study was designed to address aspects of these ethical dilemmas through transparency and respect. At the beginning of each interview, I told the women that the content of the interview was dependent on what they wanted to share, and what they felt was important. I mentioned that I respected them as knowledgeable informants on their work, their lives and experiences, and that they were 'the experts,' not myself. I hoped this would allow the participants to feel comfortable in sharing what they felt was important, rather than focusing on their interpretation of what I wanted to hear.

Additionally, I wanted the participants to decide for themselves whether they would share personal stories and anecdotes, or would speak solely from their position as volunteer, coordinator, or facilitator. I did not want to force the women to recount personal stories about difficult times in their lives, unless they wished to do so. The participants' ability to withhold personal or sensitive information during the interview can lower the risk of inadvertently causing emotional stress or harm (Bulmer 2008, 150). As such, some participants spoke about their personal experiences with violence such as rape, conflict, and domestic violence, while others focused more exclusively on their work with women in the community.

To increase their comfort, I shared the interview questions with the participants before we began and stated that we could either follow the list of questions, or that we could use them as a guideline for a more open conversation. Two participants chose to tell their stories without following the list of questions in a format more closely associated with narrative. Other participants preferred a more structured interview style with me guiding the conversation with the interview questions.

Both methods, narrative and semi-structured interviewing, provided a great wealth of information and were flexible enough that the women were able to tell their stories and feel comfortable with the process. One participant mentioned that she planned to translate the list of questions into her own language to use as a template for her conversation circle. She felt the questions would be valuable to the women attending her group to allow them to reflect on their own experiences in Canada. However, not all aspects of power dynamics were eliminated as evidenced by one participant apologizing after her interview for not making eye contact during parts of the interview. She

explained that she felt she needed to show respect, and maintaining eye contact made her feel uncomfortable at times. This comment made me reflect on my position, that even though I didn't see myself in a position of authority during a conversation over coffee, she still felt she needed to show me deference.

### **Data Analysis**

After the completion of fieldwork, the process of data analysis began. Data is coded initially by analyzing written notes, memos, and transcripts of interviews for key themes allowing an integration of the data sources (Ackerly and True 2010, 180). This integration allows for the generation of rich description of themes and experiences described in the narrative (Ibid., 181). Themes drawn from the analysis are informed by the research questions and by insights provided by the participants (Bogdan and Biklen 2003, 161). Some guiding research questions were revised or updated to reflect the emerging themes. The interview questions used during the course of data gathering remained the same.

The data was reviewed a number of times over the course of the transcription and data analysis process. Reviewing data multiple times allows the researcher to focus on linking key themes and considering processes and interactions between these concepts and themes (Neuman 2012, 356). Quotations from the participants were pasted into separate MS Word documents that reflected key themes. Extensive notes and memos were added to these documents to further connect the major themes with relevant research and theory. The process of analyzing the data and drawing out themes and connections to theory informs the final results of the research (Ibid., 357). I created a

series of flowcharts throughout this process in order to organize my understanding of the themes, and the ways in which they are linked.

These processes were used to organize the data; however, careful consideration of the authenticity of the information and accuracy of the representation of participant's voices must also be central to the data analysis. It is important to note that the final written product is a representation of the understanding and meaning-making of the researcher, by connecting the personal specificities and understandings of the participants, with the "conceptual implications of these meanings to the academy" (Josselson 2007, 549). In this way, the researcher connects personal narratives with broader theory, while maintaining the authenticity of the information provided by the participants.

Following the approach recommended by Sandra Hollingsworth and Mary Dybdahl (2007, 156), the participants were again included in the research process after the completion of the analysis by having an opportunity to provide feedback on the results of the study through the dissemination of a summary of the major themes. A brief summary of the themes was sent by email to the participants along with a copy of a flowchart. The participants were encouraged to provide feedback on the themes in a manner that was most convenient to them: by email, phone, or in person. Later, a list of quotes, and the chosen pseudonym was sent separately to each participant by email for review. Again, the participants were encouraged to carefully review the material and request changes if need be.

At this time, I reminded the participants that while their identities were being kept confidential, it may be possible for people to determine who they are based on details

provided in their quotes. In a small community like Winnipeg, it can be difficult to completely keep confidentiality when describing personal details about yourself, or your work. Due to this, some participants chose to alter their quotes to remove identifying information. By sharing a summary of the analysis, and the list of quotes, I feel assured that the women who participated in the study are satisfied with the accuracy of my portrayal of their opinions and perspectives, which may reduce the risk posed by their participation in the study. The results of the research will be shared with the participants through the dissemination of the thesis and any related publications derived from this study. This reflects the methodology of the research that is grounded in respect for the participants and their knowledge.

These methodologies and methods were chosen to conform to the PACS and feminist theoretical frameworks that guide this study through the emphasis on respect and empowerment. Women's voices and perspectives are valued through a collaborative approach, and power dynamics and sources of oppression are mitigated through inclusion and transparency. The use of semi-structured and narrative interviewing with immigrant and refugee women who organize and facilitate community activities with other newcomer women provided a wealth of information regarding their perceptions of their role in the community, along with their thoughts on the challenges and strengths that exist in their communities. In the following sections this information is presented through a series of related themes. These themes represent the researcher's analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the narratives and stories presented by the study participants.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Disempowering Influences: Experiences of Hardship and Loss**

This chapter discusses the perspectives and reflections of the women I interviewed regarding their experiences in Canada. The study endeavors to affirm the strength and abilities of newcomer women while also recognizing the challenges that newcomer women experience after immigration. While newcomers may have different reasons for pursuing immigration to another country, the women in this study share numerous experiences of hardship and loss in the course of immigrating and building new lives in Canada.

The hardships relayed by the participants give a sense of overwhelming loss as they are constrained by numerous factors and barriers to well-being. These experiences are presented in the following sections that describe the loss of community, loss of family, loss of economic security, and loss of personal security and well-being outlined by the study participants. A common thread in this chapter is the experience of hardship and the negotiation of change by newcomer women in the immediate years after immigration to Canada. Many of these losses and hardships are connected and reinforce each other, as the women's traditional webs of support, community, and familiarity are unraveled in the course of immigration.

#### **Loss of Community: 'No matter what you cook here, it won't taste the same.'**

The changing geographical context of the newcomer and refugee women is mirrored by a shift in their social context. Basic understandings of concepts such as home

and community are disrupted as they are now created and envisioned in a different environment and cultural milieu. Theorists such as Ahmed-Ghosh (2011) have discussed the concept of home in terms of the changing social and geographic context of refugees and migrants. She argues that the concept or feeling of 'home' is related to the personal connections that people make with place and people, and the ways that they share these connections through culture, food, language, and familiarity (Ibid., 241). Karen, a study participant, succinctly described the depth of change that newcomers experience when relating a conversation she had with a group of newcomers about cooking in Canada:

They don't like the taste here. But I tell them, "No matter what you cook here, it won't taste the same because the meat itself is different. The water itself is different. Even the salt itself is different. So it won't taste the same."

You have to adjust it. You have to accept that it is different. [...] You have to accept the change, or stop doing the same thing. (Karen)

Something so basic and vital as cooking familiar food becomes different and disruptive to families who are attempting to create 'home' in a new place. These struggles for familiarity, community, and safety are at the core of many of the narratives of the women in this study.

Newcomer and refugee women are faced with numerous challenges that stem both from their experiences prior to coming to Canada and the multiplicity of challenges they must face once they arrive. Simultaneously, women are faced with opportunities for empowerment and other positive changes. Two significant changes noted in the research relate to the disruption or absence of traditional support systems, and a sense of homesickness and isolation experienced due to the loss of these important forms of support. These changes can be seen in newcomer women's relationships with the greater community and within families themselves.

## **Disrupted Support Systems**

While the women participating in this study came from a variety of backgrounds, many noted differences between how community is defined or experienced in their home countries and in Canada. Some women indicated that they grew up in a ‘communal culture’ and were dealing with challenges presented by moving into an individualistic culture in Canada. Certainly, newcomer women experience a shift in culture, or culture shock, when introduced to a new context in Canada. At the same time, the participants note that the loss of connection with members of their community and disruptions in their traditional support systems causes much anxiety and distress for newcomers in the initial years after arriving in Canada.

Merely asking the question, what does community mean to you, or to newcomer women, clearly illustrated the disconnection that some newcomer women feel regarding their new cultural context. Selina explains that she perceives a difference in the way that community is understood among refugee women and people born in the West:

Well they have always lived in community. They have always lived a community life. Because most of these refugee, immigrant women, they come from countries that believe in community. They don't believe in individualism. It's not 'me, me, me.' It's 'we.' That's what they were taught. [...] I'm sure they are never thinking of community. They are thinking of the group, family. But in the West, we talk about community. But refugees and immigrants, they were brought up in the community way. (Selina)

Selina understands community as something more valued or taken for granted among newcomer women than community members born in Canada. The perception of the ‘Western worldview’ as being individualistic and non-communal has also been reflected in academic theory (e.g. Walker 2004).

Many of the participants indicated that they felt that there are cultural differences in how newcomers understand and experience community, and where they draw their sources of support in comparison to their Canadian-born counterparts. Some participants described how community members related to one another in their home countries and the benefit of feeling included and supported by the group. Anna explains that there was a sense of inclusion and support in her home country that she finds lacking in the Canadian context:

Having that support is very important for me because we came from a collective society back home. We are part of something. We are part of a group. We always have friends. We have someone that will support us in everything that we do, in every undertaking.

That when we make a decision, it should be consulted by the group of people. And then when you come here and you're with your family and you also don't know what's happening.

So if you could be that support to that person it could boost the morale or that self-esteem for that person to move on or continue on. (Anna)

The community Anna describes is rooted in shared responsibility and support among the group members.

Anna also described her community as providing a sense of security where the members look out for each other and share among each other. She suggests that belonging and connectedness are fundamental components of community:

Almost everyone in the community knows you. [...] So that neighborhood would know who you are. They would know if something happens to you, and someone would really be happy to offer some help to you. And, for example, a neighbor cooks something. That neighbor will knock on your door and will share that food to you. If, for example, a robber or burglar, that would go to your house, everyone would be there for you. If there's a birthday or wedding, the street will be closed and everyone will go together.

So everyone shares every experience, every event in one's life. Everyone is so intertwined. And then your coworkers, too. They become your families, comrades, friends, everyone, everyone. You really feel you're part of something. [...] We don't feel that we're strangers to one another.

And then when you come here you're taken out from that collective community, or that community where you were, from your family, to the neighbors, to the big group. Then you're put in a new country. And in this new country, of course, many things are so different. Of course, I've seen myself, people are friendly. People are willing to help. But maybe not as the same degree to back home. (Anna)

There is a palpable sense of loss in this comment. While a sense of community and belonging is something that can be developed in Canada, it will still be different than what existed in Anna's home country.

Another participant, Marina, shares some of these perspectives and explains that she was raised with the expectation of openness and inclusion in her home country. These descriptions indicate the importance of social inclusion and belonging. Having a support system or community may be as simple as knowing that you have a friend to turn to:

The way I was brought up, I know that I can knock on to the next door neighbor or friend anytime, I don't need an appointment, I don't need to call. I can just show up and I know there will be a cup of coffee ready for me. That's community. Living together and helping each other. (Marina)

Such descriptions are poignant in their subtle but clear indication of loss. Simply having someone available to talk to and share a coffee with is significant when you no longer have that basic level of social support.

Some of the women described differences in where they locate their sources of support. Rather than looking to outsiders, social workers or therapists for support, Salima suggest that informal counselors in the community play the same role. Salimah describes the role that her mother and grandmother played in their community as informal counselors in her extended family:

My Mom, and my Grandmom, she passed away two years ago. That's what I notice inside our family and our group family, because here [people] consider family just close relatives and maybe close friends. There, we have our big families. The sister and brothers from both sides, and the Mom, and the cousins. All of them.

So I, all the time, we are busy when we are children. I sit and listen to them. Any problem they have between the husband and the wife, or between sisters they come for advice. And she would listen, good listener, and she is very confident. And she is very truthful, she says the truth, it doesn't matter, she says the short way. So I saw her all my childhood because we grow under her, her supervision. I notice when she gave advice and they listen to her.

My Mom, too, did that with also her friends, her relatives come and get advice. And I see how she is caring about people. [...] What she plants she harvests from everywhere. So she has very good relationships when she goes shopping in the markets. Because it's the same place we go shopping – neighbor, family. I think that's genetic. (Salimah)

Salimah goes on to describe how she emulates these values of empathy and support in her own life, “one of my Canadian friends, she said ‘what are you doing? You are advising people, that's money here in Canada.’ I told her I don't care about money; I care about people. [*laughs*]” Salima's experiences with the women in her family have influenced her to value building relationships among family and neighbors through mutual support and caring.

Mina reflects a similar perspective regarding informal counselors and social support rooted in the community. As with Salima's friend who indicated that social work is a well-paying career option in Canada, Mina notes that social work is viewed differently in these social and cultural contexts:

My role is sort of a social worker, but in my culture and some aspect of religion, [we] are all social workers in our life. We are trying to provide that support. For some people that's a natural ability to help. For here, you actually go to school and get a degree in social work. (Mina)

These participants make clear that their preferred or expected sources of support are embedded in their social relationships among family members, friends, and neighbors.

## **Homesickness and Isolation**

Throughout many of the interviews, the participants referred to isolation as being a major challenge and significant barrier to well-being experienced by newcomer women. The disruption of traditional support systems such as friends, familiar neighbors, and extended family significantly contribute to the sense of loss and isolation experienced by some newcomer women. Marina described the isolation and culture shock she experienced after she initially arrived in Canada:

Coming from abroad where everybody was there for you, every night after work people will get together, will talk, and will share laughter and tears. So there was really less time where you will spend the week by yourself. So coming here, for the first week it was very strange to be at home all day and no one showing up for a visit. [...] The women who access our services share the same experience of isolation, and culture identity loss. It's not community living. (Marina)

Simple social expectations and sources of support such as the availability of friends and family to spend time with creates a disruption in newcomer's lives as these support systems may need to be recreated in their new context.

The participants also reported that the security of being aware of and confident about their surroundings diminished after immigrating to the country, along with their understanding of social expectations and norms. Selina explained that refugee women also experience confusion and fear when they leave their homes, as many arrive in Canada with little or no English language comprehension:

While we were doing our needs assessment we found that the women in the community here in Central Park were virtually isolated. Most of them had come from war-torn countries like myself. They were afraid because they couldn't speak the language. They couldn't understand most of the things that were going on around them. So they were virtually housebound. (Selina)

Without support systems to rely on to help navigate these changes, newcomer women can become withdrawn. This is exacerbated by feelings of fear and not-knowing due to a

language barrier. Improving English-language skills can help address this issue, however, many participants indicated that newcomer women have additional barriers that may prevent them from accessing these services.

The study participants explained that part of women's isolation is a product of their role as caregiver in the family, and, at times, single motherhood. Kyi describes the situation of many newcomer women being isolated in the home because they are caring for their children:

Usually for women, because if your husband works and you have two or three kids, you don't have a lot of chance to go to school, to go out, to meet other families. If your husband goes to full-time school, what are you going to do? You have kids, you have breast-feeding kids, and the kids come one by one.

Yesterday, we met a woman, twenty-one years old, has five kids already so [pause] never have a chance to go to school. Not that her husband is not good. Her husband is very good. He works everyday for his family. And this woman just has no time to do other activities. [...]

They're falling behind. She stays young, she's been here four or five years. She doesn't speak enough English. Never meets other people who speak English. (Kyi)

Not only are some newcomer women isolated from other members of their community, but they may not have a sufficient opportunity to improve their English language ability which may diminish their chances of achieving social and economic well-being. This situation was reflected in many participants' narratives.

The issues of isolation, lack of English language ability, and family obligations intertwine and create a very difficult situation for newcomer women in the immediate period after arriving in Canada. Safia notes that most of the women she works with are single mothers who experience homesickness and depression due to the combination of their isolation in the community, separation from their families, and other challenges:

Most of the single women when they come here they have a language problem for sure. And the culture shock is so much for them. Because most of them – people



from my country come from a different culture, mostly a conservative culture – and here most of them face problems with the children at the school and their dress code, or their behavior, the words.

And because no one has any family members here – most of them are the only family that comes here until they get to know some friends of the family – they go through a period of being lonely and homesick, and get depression, and don't know how to access the services.

So I help them with going to the children's parent-teacher meeting and interpret for them. And if they have any other problems, like a doctor's appointment, or if the school sends a psychologist to talk to them, I go there and interpret for those. (Safia)

While change *can* be empowering, it can also be extremely disempowering when people lack access to social supports to help them navigate and adjust.

Underlying much of the hardship experienced by newcomer women after immigration to Canada is the profound change to both context and identity that disrupts traditional support systems, and results in homesickness and isolation. The women experience culture shock as they are no longer surrounded by extended family members and friends who serve as important social supports. They feel disconnected from the culture in Canada that they experience as particularly individualistic in comparison to their own worldview. As Karen so succinctly states, “No matter what you cook here, it won't taste the same.” Newcomer women also contend with the culture shock and fear related to their lack of knowledge or understanding of their new context, compounded by their lack of English language ability. These factors, along with family responsibilities, result in isolation and homesickness. Feeling a loss of connection, a loss of familiarity, and above all, a loss of community creates a significant barrier for newcomer women to overcome in the process of building a new sense of home in Canada.

**Loss of Family:**  
**“The parents feel powerless and they don’t know what to do.”**

Changes in how community members relate to one another affect not only relations between neighbors, but can have an impact on intra-family dynamics. The relationships between family members and their expected roles are influenced, in part, by culture. Some newcomers are confronted with cultural differences regarding approaches to parenting and family dynamics in Canada. Ahmed-Ghosh (2011) encountered a similar conflict in her study of Afghan mothering in the United States. Her participants found that mothering in the United States was a deliberate and individualistic activity, rather one located within the community and shared among extended family and neighbors (Ibid., 244). This change resulted in additional burdens in the lives of newcomer women as they attempt to negotiate and cope with the plethora of changes resulting from immigration. The women I spoke with indicated that interfamilial and intergenerational conflict is a significant and ongoing challenge for newcomer women.

As identities shift and change in response to immigration, so do norms and expectations within relationships. Another loss and hardship experienced by newcomer women relates to changing dynamics within families. Three of these changing dynamics were noted in the interviews and concern the ways that newcomer women become disempowered in their role as parents, their fear of being separated from their children due to changing norms surrounding childcare practices, and conflict with their spouses due to changing gender roles. Challenges surrounding lack of English language ability, isolation, and fear contribute to many of the conflicts and hardships that newcomer women experience within their own families, and in their role as spouses and mothers.

## Disempowerment as Parents

All participants noted the trouble that families, particularly mothers, have in raising children in Canada. Children adapt to the Canadian context and, importantly, learn English much faster than their parents. This produces a tension between children and their parents, all of whom are struggling. Delia explains how power dynamics within the family change when children learn English quicker than their parents:

Here is the partner that is trying to speak on his wife's behalf. And now, because she is a stay-at-home mom, she's not really exposed to all sorts of people. So here's the children that go to school, and [the mothers] can't even be of help to their children's assignment or homework.

But kids learn fast and before you know it they are the one that represent their parents [...] They try to fill in on behalf of their parents. That's good, that's empowering. But, the thing is that when I speak to the mom, and it's the child that is talking on behalf of his or her mom, it's pretty disempowering on the part of the mom because she doesn't even know what the child is talking about. She would relate to the child, and the child would speak to me in English, so now she's just listening.

So I can see the power between the child and the parent there that is building towards that. Young people learn fast, just like me when I was new here and my children had to go to school – my oldest child. But children they are –. [pause] Every child is unique and some are more supportive and more respectful. (Delia)

Lack of English, isolation, and conflict within the family combine to create an extremely difficult situation for newcomer women. It is beneficial for the family to have children that adapt and learn English quickly; however, this changes the relationship between parents and their children by inverting the power dynamic.

Grace also reflects this perspective, explaining that the isolation and level of conflict between generations within a family is greatly influenced by newcomer women's language ability. Women are expected to care for their children at home and they face difficulty when they do not adapt to the language or cultural context of Canada in the same way, or at the same speed as their children:

And then the intergenerational conflict. When we come our kids learn like that. [*finger snap*] They learn the language really fast. They learn the customs very quickly, in their own way. Sometimes our kids know only about their rights. They forget about their responsibilities.

So it becomes a conflict between the first generation and their kids. A single mother who comes with kids, young kids who are small, like one, two, three years old, [*pause*] they stay at home, don't learn English. (Grace)

Newcomer and refugee women may have less access to language training programs if they are at home caring for their children. Meanwhile, their lack language proficiency can also contribute to conflict with their children when the power dynamic within the home shifts.

Culture also influences the dynamics present within communities and families.

Parents and children do not necessarily respond in the same way to challenges or changes to their social location or cultural context, which can create conflict within families. Safia describes how members of her community respond to these changes, and the conflict that these changes can engender:

Over there it's all about being communal and community. Taking care of everybody that is younger than you, or everybody that you know. But here, it's mostly an individual lifestyle. So the kids grow up taking care of their own needs. It's important for them to take care of their own needs, but their parents expect them to take care of everyone's needs. The mom, sister, and brother, all members of the family.

In Afghan culture, if an older person tells you in the street, you don't even know them, "do this thing," you do it for them out of respect. If you don't do it, it means your family didn't [*bring*] you up properly. But here it's not like that. There [*are*] lots of challenges that you don't see when you look around, but you have to really go into it and find out what's going on. [...]

What I hear from most of the women and my mother is that, "you forgot your culture. You forgot your manners. And this is not the way that I wanted you to be. And if you go back, if someone sees you from back home, they think that I lack in bringing you up properly."

And they are so upset because they think that they didn't do their job properly in bringing you up the way you are supposed to be. But for children here that grow up with that, it doesn't make sense. (Safia)

While parents have a desire to maintain aspects of their culture, and may also face social pressure to do so, these cultural values or practices may be challenged from within the family. Children who are growing up in the new context and are being influenced by a variety of people outside the home may challenge aspects of their culture that do not respond to their lived reality, creating conflict in the family.

### **Fear of Separation from Children**

When there are disputes in the family some children use threats of calling the police and child and family services (CFS) against their parents, producing further distress for the parents who feel disempowered in their role in the family. Some of the study participants described how institutions in Canada do not respond to the needs of newcomer parents who require support in adapting to Canadian laws and social norms, including important changes to their parenting styles:

Now the growing barrier is the child and family services system. This system has a different way of seeing that the children are in need of protection, where it may be a difference in culture, miscommunication, or a simple thing of just sitting down with the parent saying, “This can’t be happening, but these are the tools we are putting in place for you so you can try to improve your parenting skills.” Instead, the system is quick to apprehend and break family cohesion. We are seeing lots of kids are going in care now. (Marina)

Many participants repeated this theme. Fear, misunderstanding, and miscommunication with outside agencies can lead to a feeling of powerlessness and intra-family conflict.

Some participants mentioned that while the system is adapting to some of these concerns, problems continue to persist. Astrida describes the emerging dynamic of mothers having trouble adjusting to new disciplining techniques while children use the threat of external intervention against their parents:

They have some challenges in raising up their children. Yeah, the children. [pause] You know in our culture – people from Congo, Burundi, East Africa – we like to punish our children if they do wrong things. Sometimes you get the stick and you say “lie down,” and you hit them. And here you can’t.

So they say, “Mama! I’m calling 911!” And for that, the women become crazy for 911.

Other things they say, “If I shout at my child, [I] feel they will take them [away] from me.” (Astrida)

Children certainly need to be protected from violence and abuse in the home, yet the institutions and laws that are supposed to protect children can be confusing and disempowering for women if they do not have the support required to form new parenting styles or disciplining techniques.

Salmiah spoke about her experience of coming to Canada as a single mother with two young sons. She was informed upon arrival of the differences in social expectations regarding parenting and disciplining, and the enforcement mechanisms that the state can use in response to violations:

The first time when I came, “Don’t hit your child, don’t yell on your child.”

I said, “Why?”

They said, “The government will take [them] out from you.”

And make me like, “How come?” My children, I should discipline them. Not hitting them, but they should listen to me.

It’s different. This is [the] first time when I arrived. This is the first thing they teach me. So no, when [newcomer women] listen to that, they don’t touch the children. They don’t discipline. [...] Ok, the child might get advantage from that.

Also, when the schools say to them, “When your mom [doesn’t] care [about] you, or when she yell or call names.” [pause] They take that advantage if they are not good.

They say, “Ok.” Every time they say to the mom, “I will call 911.”

I told her, “Don’t be afraid. Don’t let them threaten you. Understand the law. Why, how they will take the baby. What the situation.” For that, we will provide them some orientation on that and speak with them one by one. And let her know what her role, and what her child’s role [is], and she will be strong. To not get threatened from the babies. (Salimah)

Salimah’s story indicates the difficulty that newcomer women can experience in adjusting to social norms in Canada while maintaining their role of authority in their

families. It also indicates the importance of having guidance and assistance during this transition period to help newcomers understand the new rules and to adjust accordingly.

Selina connects the disempowerment of parents and intra-family conflict with challenges and social problems that children are experiencing such as exposure to drugs, gangs, and violence:

So these are most of the things that the refugees and new immigrants are facing. And that power that they don't have to discipline their children. Because if you shout, they threaten to call 911. And the parents are scared because they don't want 911 to come into their home, or police or CFS to come and take their kids away.

So the kids are going astray and [the parents] don't have a voice because they are scared. That's how we find that most of our children are falling to drugs, to gangs, to drug addiction – because the parents feel powerless and they don't know what to do.

The children are having power over parents. It's a difficult situation. How can we solve it? That's the biggest question that I can ask. How can we solve it?  
(Selina)

Due to the fear of government intervention in their families, newcomer women “don't have a voice,” (Selina) and are disempowered in their role as parents. Newcomer parents need support in changing their parenting practices to suit the Canadian context while still being able to maintain their role of authority and the cohesion of the family unit.

Some women suggested that fear of rules, regulations, and intervention by police and CFS further exacerbated tensions in the community and contributed to the process of breaking down communal bonds. A few participants noted that in their home countries people would trust each other to care for their children while they are out running errands or otherwise occupied, and that this was a natural and reciprocal relationship between neighbors. Anna explains that some newcomer women feel less comfortable caring for other children in Canada because they fear transgressing one of these new parenting regulations and having the state intervene:

Maybe because of the big misconceptions about the law, when you do this, do that, be like this. These are the consequences when you help other people, when you touch someone. There is so many fears now.

And also, in our country, the village, the neighbor raises children too. If they see something that your child does something wrong, they will tell their children too. Some spank other children, but of course family members will be mad when other people do that. But they will just say ‘oh, don’t do that. I will tell your mom.’ Or after that happened, that neighbor will tell your mom right away.

People are looking after one another. But here, there’s that fear that when you see something, when you wanted to help, you might be caught, or [pause]. Fear of unknown. (Anna)

As with the women in Ahmed-Ghosh’s (2011) study, newcomer women in Canada find that parenting is less of a community activity. These changes may not only be because of different social norms in Canada, they may be partially driven by fear and misunderstanding.

The fear of the unknown can be very powerful. This message came across strongest and most viscerally when Safia explained that some refugee women have told her that they would rather experience the insecurity of the refugee camp than be safe in Canada, but separated from their children. “Some [refugee women] would rather be in the refugee camp or be in some other situation than here because now they think they don’t even have control over the children” (Safia). A known threat may be easier to deal with than the unknown. Former refugee women suffered through a great deal before coming to Canada with their families, and after arriving some face the trauma of forced separation from their children, and the insinuation that they are unfit parents.

### **Gender Dynamics and Family Breakdown**

Shifting identities and gender roles can have a significant impact on intra-familial dynamics as well. Both women and men from extremely patriarchal cultures face changes to their identities, and therefore, their relationships as they come to Canada – a country



with an arguably more limited patriarchal culture. Astrida spoke about how these changes can cause conflict within families:

And other challenges are that if they come here in our country the men [are] the head of house. And the men, the head of house, they have all of authority. If you need money or permission to go somewhere, you must ask your husband. But here, people are free to do whatever they want. And also the money goes to the woman [*this is in reference to the Canada child tax benefit*].

For that, the men have to say, "Oh, can you give me \$20 to buy something? Can you give me \$100 to send back home?"

And the woman becomes a leader and they say, "No! I can't give you. You want money just to send to your parent. You want money to buy something to drink." And they start to fight.

And so I say, "Yeah, you have money, but this is a man. He's your husband. He's head of the house. Yeah, just obey him." And the men also, they don't like it too. [...] They are fighting. No love, no unity. Every time you come to their house they are just fighting. Changes. About money, children, and the food. (Astrida)

Astrida notes that gender roles change as women are able to assert more power and authority in their relationships causing conflict within the family. She also states that she feels that the women in these relationships should remain somewhat deferential to their husbands in order to avoid this conflict, suggesting that she values maintaining these marriages more than women's ability to assert authority in the relationship.

Stigma can also exist surrounding seeking outside help or guidance for these challenges. A few participants mentioned the prevalence of gossip in newcomer communities that acts as another barrier to addressing the challenges wrought by changing identities and gender roles:

Those fears, like when they have trouble in the couples. People tell them that when you go to the social worker, they will tell your wife to divorce you. So, the community is watching how you will behave.

The fear of the community, stigma, judgment, gossiping is a big problem. The gossiping, the [*muffled*], gender roles, [*pause*] they can take only one example and they generalize it. One thing happens to one woman and they take it and they begin to apply it everywhere. "It happened to me, and if you go, it will happen to you." And it creates that fear. (Grace)

Newcomer women may become further isolated due to reluctance to speak about the problems they are facing in their families due to the fear of state intervention or social sanctions from the community.

The changing social context and competing cultural norms impact the way that newcomer women adapt to their new home in Canada and cope with the difficulties associated with their move. Sources of social support are disrupted and conflict can erupt in families where the power dynamic shift between parents and their children, and between husbands and wives. These changes in role and identity can result in the disempowerment of newcomer women in their role as parents. Furthermore, newcomer women face a significant challenge in adapting their parenting style and disciplining techniques to suit the social norms of the Canadian context. Not only must they make these changes, but they may also face the severe repercussion of being separated from their children by social service agencies if they do not. At the same time, gender dynamics in the home are also changing and while women may attempt to assert more power in their relationships, this may result in conflict within the family. These changes and difficulties can lead to further isolation and fear.

**Loss of Economic Security:**  
**“[They] say, ‘You’re safe here.’ I don’t think that’s enough.”**

Unemployment and underemployment are significant barriers to well-being experienced by many newcomers and Canadians alike. Barbara H. Chasin (2004) explains that structural violence “occurs when people are harmed because they lack access to resources available to others” (15). Newcomer women are prone to experience economic insecurity, finding that the few jobs that are available to them pay very little,

offer few benefits, and result in further downward economic and social mobility (Snyder 2011b). Structural violence is hidden as it cannot be directly tied to the actions of one person, but is “built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” (Galtung 1969, 171). Through the intersection of the various aspects of their identity, newcomer women experience structural violence in the form of economic insecurity. They are constrained by structural barriers relating to their gender, race, religion, and immigrant status that result in them experiencing disproportionate levels of poverty and economic insecurity.

Economic insecurity is one of the most significant challenges that newcomer women and their families face. This section will discuss the various pressures newcomer women experience relating to economic insecurity. While newcomer women often feel pressure to leverage their material and economic needs over their need for connection, many experience difficulty in gaining meaningful or stable employment. They also contend with structural constraints such as the lack of recognition of their knowledge, skills, and credentials, making finding comparable work extremely difficult. Refugee women who lack prior education and work experience are confronted with additional challenges while still facing pressure to find employment. At times, migration to Canada is based on economic coercion where immigrant women are drawn to low-paying service jobs in the hope that they can build better lives for themselves and their families. These women sometimes face exploitative or abusive work environments. Due to a lack of options and structural constraints newcomer women often face a situation where they must work in what Spitzer (2011b) refers to as ‘survival jobs’ that do not meet their needs. These various challenges, and forms of structural violence, serve to further

compound the stress and difficulty experienced by newcomer women who are simultaneously attempting to navigate and understand life in Canada.

### **Leveraging Material Needs over the Need for Connection**

Some of the participants who chose to immigrate to Canada with their families not as refugees, but as economic immigrants, described how their goals of providing a better life for their families became at odds with the difficult economic reality that they experienced after they arrived. Family and community were of central importance prior to coming to Canada, but upon moving, some immigrant families found that attention had to become refocused on individual, material needs.

Many participants described how providing for their children, both economically and emotionally, were of central importance in their lives. This idea came across particularly strongly in the interviews with Karen and Anna. Karen explained that members of her community “came here because of the kids.” After arrival in Canada, they found that they were unable to have the family life that they had expected:

They’re too busy, I would say. Because some people when they come here, their first goal is to buy a house. Find employment maybe, then buy a house, and a nice car. What happens is that we get paid minimum wage, or maybe more than minimum wage, and, because of the loans, they have to work double time.

Back home, people live in extended families. When a child arrives, there will be a grandmother there. A person will be there, auntie or uncle. There is usually people to come home to so that the house isn’t empty. But here, they live only with their family and the kids don’t have anyone to go home to. (Karen)

Families are separated from extended family members who would otherwise have helped with childrearing, and due to low paying jobs in Canada, both parents are required to gain outside employment.

Anna noted that her main goal in pursuing community development is to strengthen or revive the focus on relationships within the family, and within the community at large. She worries that newcomers are becoming preoccupied by economic stresses and concerns and are not spending time rebuilding these important relationships:

I'm thinking that too, for our community, we're so caught up in our current needs. But what about our children? What about our families? We all came here to have a better – sorry, I'm becoming emotional. *[pause]* To have a better life for our family. But when we come here, financial needs, material needs are becoming our masters. So what happened to that family? Where is the family value that you want to inculcate to your children and to you too? [...]

And maybe more of sharing of what are your experiences now, and what's your plan. And opening that up, to have that, another collective society again. Because here people became so separated from one another. Maybe sometimes they just see themselves, but *[don't]* see the others.

But to have that sense of community again. Sense of your, that we're a group. That we should be there for one another. [...] I think that's my goal, I can't just make it so clear, but that's what I'm envisioning. To have that big group that has many activities for families. That has more resources for families. Especially that is geared for newcomers, so that everyone will have the opportunity to spend time together, realize so many things, and be supported. (Anna)

Material needs become paramount as newcomers are faced with numerous barriers in accessing employment that is sufficient in providing for their basic needs. Anna recognizes that newcomer families struggle with economic insecurity and difficulty, and she feels that rebuilding strong relationships and a strong community is an important way to alleviate these challenges.

### **Unrecognized Knowledge and Skills**

Refugee women often come to Canada without formal education, marketable skills, and work experience. When they do, as was the case with some of the women I interviewed, they found that their credentials, education, and work experience were not recognized in the Canadian labour market. They were then required to work in low-

paying jobs until they were able to access additional training or education, all the while balancing the needs of their families:

Some of the challenges are employment. That's the big one. The family that access our service are professional in their country, and when they come here their diploma and previous work experience are not recognized. So they end up having to work labour work or really, minimal work, and they're not feeling satisfied. But they are also grateful that at least they have the job and they're able to provide for their basic needs. For example, to be able to bring food to the table. (Marina)

Working at low-paying jobs puts a strain on newcomer families as they struggle with material needs and the hardship and disillusionment of not having their skills and abilities recognized.

Many of the study participants had previous education, or worked in professional careers before coming to Canada. Those who did expressed similar frustration about their experiences in gaining comparable employment in Canada. Karen told me about the surprise and disappointment that she and her husband experienced after arriving. They found that their credentials were not recognized, and they were unable to find work in their respective fields:

Then, when he got a job – he was an engineer back home – he couldn't find a job in any office. But no one told us about that. No one told us that you will never find the same job. Maybe they don't want to burst our bubble. [We expected a job] not exactly the same, but similar. No one told us about that, we were not aware that it would be that difficult. [...]

I worked in a call center, that was a very difficult job for me because of the language, and the training wasn't very good as well. And then seeing your husband work in a factory was difficult for me, too. The kids were doing fine. That's one thing that held us most. The kids were able to adjust very quickly. (Karen)

The hardship experienced after arriving in Canada – the loss of security, status, and identity – is made worse by the sense of being misled or deceived by the promise that the country holds to many prospective immigrants. The experience of downward mobility and being held to manufacturing and service jobs despite having education and

experience are examples of structural constraints based on immigrant status (Snyder 2011b, 28).

Selina also shared the experience of needing to upgrade her education after she arrived, despite having education and professional work experience in her home country. She recognizes while she faced difficulty, she was aided by her proficiency in English, a skill that many refugee women do not have:

When I came in 2002 as a refugee, things were not really rosy, rosy. But the only advantage I had was that I had the English language, because my country and my education is in English, because we were colonized by the British people. So that is the only advantage that I had. Other than that, I had so many other stumbling blocks. I wanted to do this. I can't do it. I wanted to do that. I can't do it.

But, I had the willpower that I can, I can do something because my background was nursing and administration. But when I came, I couldn't do that [...] because of the credentials, all those issues.

So I decided to go back to university and did my social work degree. But I'm happy now that there are established bodies that are looking at these credential issues. That are making this much more easier than it was in 2002. But they still have to improve on them. There are still systemic barriers that people face when they come here. (Selina)

Finding employment to support yourself and your family when your skills and experience are not recognized is a significant hurdle to overcome when newcomers are balancing various other challenges. Selina admits that while this is changing for the better, there are still many barriers to well-being that newcomer women contend with.

Not only does the lack of recognition of their work experience and education create economic challenges for newcomer women as they attempt to find employment to support themselves and their families, it also plays into the changing identity that newcomers experience. Employment and social status play a significant role in shaping people's identity. Marina described the impact of this experience in terms of her self-perception, "I know how it feels to come with your own career and not being able to

work in that profession, and having to re-orient into another career field, it's another identity breakdown" (Marina). It is a challenge that results in economic insecurity, disillusionment, and potentially depression among newcomers.

### **Lack of Formal Education and Pressure to find Work**

The lack of recognition of their credentials forces women to choose to work in other professions or fields, or to return to school and be retrained. Other refugee women face additional hurdles as they may lack formal education or work experience in their home countries as well. Being refugees, their move to Canada was not planned nor prepared for; rather, they were forced to flee their homes to avoid violence and conflict. This reality ensures that many refugee women face significant challenges in entering the Canadian labour market. Natasha explains:

The women who come here, a lot of them are lost. It's very difficult for them. They come here, [sometimes] they say they have brothers in Denmark, Sweden, and France.

I say, "Why are you here?"

"Well I had no choice. My number came up next on the list, Canada is taking 400 refugees, and either I come here or I stay in a refugee camp."

So they come. They have no choice to come here. They come here. They have no idea what Canada is, where Winnipeg is. They just get put into Winnipeg. They don't have the English. They don't have anything. They come with little kids, and even by themselves, or however they come, and it's very stressful for them.

And people don't realize, people outside – I didn't understand how stressful it was for them. So when refugees as a whole come here, they have a lot going on with them.

People have to understand the difference between refugees and immigrants. An immigrant chooses this place to come to. An immigrant usually comes with skills. An immigrant usually comes with some language, comes with some money, whatever. A refugee is just put here. No family, no friends, no English. Lots of trauma from wherever they come by. And it's a long road, and a long process for them to get out of it. Some of them never do. Some do; some don't. (Natasha)

In this statement, Natasha illustrates not only some of the issues that some refugee women contend with, but the significant lack of agency or control that they experience



when they are unable to even choose where to live. It also hints at the discrimination directed at refugees, as people do not fully understand the day-to-day challenges that they are faced with.

The lack of previous work experience and English language ability puts refugee newcomers at a significant disadvantage when trying to find employment. Kyi describes the situation of members of her community, some of whom are illiterate in their own languages:

They don't have a lot of language skills, and a lot of them, older people, they don't read or write in their own language. So they come here and study for how many years, but they don't understand English, it's hard for them. [...]

But usually in my community, parents come here and after one year they start to work right away. They don't speak English, but because they get along with the church, the community, and they help each other. Mostly they get a job, in a factory, chicken factory, farm equipment building, they do something with that. Kids go to school. It's good, but sometimes it's difficult. (Kyi)

While their children have the opportunity to go to school in Canada and build the skills necessary to find employment, some newcomer parents have little formal education and face difficulty finding stable or well-paying jobs. Kyi demonstrates that her community supports these members to find modest employment, despite the disadvantages they experience.

Locating employment through other community members is not always sufficient, and barriers to employment persist for many newcomers. Safia explains the difficulty that refugee women are faced with as they attempt to gain access to the labour market without previous work experience or strong English language skills:

Most of them are single women. They don't have education. First of all, language is a big one. Second, most of them, they don't have education or any skill that they can go out and apply their skill and find something here.

The family that comes as refugee under RAP [*Resettlement Assistance Program*]. So government supplies them for a year. Then after that they have to go

to social assistance. Social assistance asks them to go either to school or find a job. If your [English language benchmark] level is three to four, they ask you to find a job. “How many jobs you applied during this month?” You have to show them.

Most of those women never worked when they were in Afghanistan. They don’t have any job experience. They don’t have any resume. It’s so difficult for them to find a job because of the language and lack of opportunity.

Then there’s lots of pressure from the social assistance to find a job. And Winnipeg is so small, and the job market is not that big. There’s lots of competition. There are lots of people who have education. They have the skills, they know the language, and they are working at minimum wage too, at 7-11 or cleaning. This is one challenge that they are facing. (Safia)

Women face a shift in their identities and roles as they are required to find outside employment for the first time. Compounding this is the pressure that is placed on them to quickly secure a job despite lacking English language skills and relatable work experience. This places refugee women at a significant disadvantage in terms of finding employment, and it places them under a great deal of stress when they are unable to find a job.

### **Migration and Economic Coercion**

The economic challenges that refugee women face after arriving in Canada are significant. As well, it is important to recognize that other immigrants can also face tremendous hardships. Delia describes herself as being passionate about migrant worker’s rights. She explained to me the experience of migrant women coming to Canada for employment and the hope of a better future for their children:

I said before there is a push and pull factor. Your country is pushing you to leave your own country. And there’s this other country, the receiving country, that is pulling you to migrate.

[Before it was] things that a certain country [was] exporting, but now it’s different. Now it’s the immigrants or the migrant women who are being commodified [because] the sending and receiving country are making a profit from the migration. [...]

Migration is not really a unique thing. But today's migration is different from the migration in the past. Now, we talk about globalization. Now, it's a trend in many developing countries.

Most of the people who are migrating are women. For example, the work that they do is mostly household work, entertainment, in the services, healthcare, nurses, teachers. These are women. And when they come here, who knows what's bound to happen with them.

Delia's identity as an activist is clear. She does not see immigration as necessarily being a free choice, but one that is coerced through economic factors. Not only is the choice coerced, but also immigrant women become objects as they are "commodified" by the countries who wish to use their gendered skills, and the countries who wish to benefit from the remittances they pay.

Canada's Live-in Caregiver program allows women to come to Canada as temporary residents and work as nannies or caregivers in the homes of their employers. After a minimum of 22 months, they are able to apply for permanent resident status and include their family members, who have remained in their home country, on their application (CIC 2012a). Delia explains that while many women choose to immigrate to Canada under this program, they still face significant challenges, including exploitation by their employers:

You really don't know the many challenges you will face as a woman who migrated to a different country like Canada. And most governments don't really care what's going to happen to them.

There's no protection, I would say. If they are protecting these people from the country way back, they will be making moves to educate them first. At least what to expect. They don't really do that. If they did that I don't think a lot of women would be migrating to other countries.

For example, you apply as a nanny. It's a three-year [work contract], but, for example, you're being paid minimum wage, \$10.50 per hour. But, of course, you are working there as a live-in. That would be twenty-four hours of living in your employer's house for three years. And you are only getting paid [for] eight-hour shifts. But you're there twenty-four hours.

Do you think that \$10.50 an hour is compensating them? If, for example, the child that they are looking after [is sick], they are the one who [are] getting up at night. [...] It's the nanny or the caregiver that will be awake.

So, too many things. And they are prone to more oppression and exploitation because they're isolated. (Delia)

Delia echoes Karen's comment that prospective immigrants are not aware of the challenges that await them in Canada, and suggests that women are lead to believe that it will be much easier than reality to become prosperous, and to be able to bring their families.

Working as a nanny provides Canadian families with the opportunity to focus on their work and lives. This work environment constitutes structural violence when the women doing this care work are not sufficiently compensated so they can provide for their own families. The inequality present in this example is at the center of the intersection of the race, class, gender, and immigrant status of newcomer women.

In response to these statements I asked Delia to clarify whether people are leaving their countries without knowing what they're getting into. She responded that the hopes of making a better life, and bringing their families to Canada are out of reach for many migrant women, or are at least more difficult to attain that they had believed:

I would say so, because their objective is to earn money and better their lives, and be able to send money to their children back home. And the reality that after three years they will be able to reunite with their family is impossible to happen, because after three years is only the time that they can start applying for permanent residence.

It will take time because they're under contract for two to three years full-time. After that, they will have to work hard, and they are being de-skilled with your career or your profession. And it's the same type of job that you will be doing for almost the rest of your life.

And here you are, you're trying to stabilize yourself economically, or mentally. Trying to have your own house, which is impossible. Trying to sponsor your children, it's impossible.

For example, they become permanent resident. So what kind of jobs can they apply for? Cleaning. Cleaning jobs for most of them. There were many of them who

were, even in Canada, who were abused and raped. And even their employers, they could not file a complaint, because they are important people in the community who are exploiting them. So they are scared because they will be deported. (Delia)

Delia describes the situation as being akin to “modern-day slavery,” stating that “we used to import raw materials, now it’s the human beings, and mostly women are being commodified.” Not only is it difficult to bring their families to Canada, but they also face economic insecurity and sometimes gender violence, such as rape and sexual violence. These comments tie structural barriers to well-being such as economic insecurity, with direct violence experienced by women who are abused in the workplace.

### **Multiple Barriers and ‘Survival Jobs’**

In the example provided by Delia, an abusive employer places some newcomer women in a situation where they must leverage their economic well-being over their personal safety. Economic insecurity and poverty are aspects of structural violence in that they perpetuate marginalization through uneven access to resources and power (Galtung 1969; Jeong 2000, 20-21). Spitzer notes that immigrant women in Canada are “likely to avail themselves of so-called ‘survival jobs,’” such as part-time work, that do not meet their economic needs and are not commensurate with their educational qualifications (Spitzer 2011b, 27-28). Newcomer women possess unequal access to power due to the intersection of aspects of their identity such as gender, race, and immigration status, resulting in constrained and limited options.

Many of the jobs that are available to newcomer women are those that are considered pink-collar work, or work that is traditionally associated with women, such as caregiving and working in the service sector. Delia, who works with both immigrant and refugee women states:

Most of them are looking for part-time jobs [it's] always cleaning jobs, housecleaning, baby-sitter, stay home parents. It's the same kind of jobs that they're looking. They say they have no skills other than that.

I tell them you're already a skill[ed] woman because it's not easy to do that. But it's the kind of work that the system is offering to us. It's like you're confined to that kind of job. But I would like to get that strength. Maximize it, not minimize that. (Delia)

Delia sees that refugee women are being shuffled into this line of work, and fears that they will be “de-skilled” and held there in the long-term. In response, Delia would like to see the system value the skills that newcomer women bring, and offer them jobs that meet their needs.

Safia noted that this is also the reality of some of the women that she works with as they rely on meager wages from baby-sitting, and additional income that can be brought in by their teenage children in order to pay the bills. She explains:

Some of those women they babysit their neighbors or other friends to make some money. Or teenager children, when they're working, they give their money to help take care of the others, like sending back home or to the rent because the rent is increasing. (Safia)

Barriers to employment, such as language and lack of education or marketable skills, converge with patriarchal structures that do not highly value domestic work in the labour market such as cooking, cleaning, childrearing, or other caring or service professions resulting in low-paying, insecure forms of employment.

Racism and discrimination are other systemic barriers that newcomer women experience when entering the Canadian workforce. Natasha relayed a story about a Muslim woman facing discrimination when she applied for a job:

One of the things they face because they're Muslim, most of the women wear the hijab. One of them told me she went for a job, and the guy told her he couldn't take her if she's wearing the hijab. Or another said he didn't like her style of hijab. That it's too big, she should wear the smaller one.

The first thing is that they are a visible minority because of skin colour and the hijab. And they face challenges when they go out there and look for any, and it doesn't matter what kind, could be a cleaning job, but they still face that. That's one of the challenges that they face. (Natasha)

Discrimination, like many of the other barriers that newcomer women experience, create economic insecurity as women have difficulty finding quality employment, as well as contributing to conflict surrounding identity. Structural barriers in Canada, such as patriarchy, poverty, and racism constrain newcomer women and limit their potential.

Many of the women interviewed described multiple barriers and challenges that newcomer women experience in trying to find a job and provide for their families. Many of the participants were also quick to note that actions are being taken to improve the circumstances of newcomer women, and that while it can be difficult, many women are struggling through and making a life for themselves. Mina explains that communities and governments that bring refugees to Canada cannot be complacent about their circumstances after they arrive:

We recognize and acknowledge that the government brings these people and rescues them. But when they bring them here, they come from this refugee experience, and they're dumping them in this huge place. And then say, "You're safe here."

I don't think that's enough. You have to go above and beyond that. Sometimes I think that if I was a child of this I would have ended completely differently. (Mina)

This comment gets at the heart of the structural violence that newcomer women experience. It is not enough to simply remove people from violent conflict, but communities and governments must endeavor to address the inequality, discrimination, and hardship that punctuates the experience of refugees and migrants after they arrive in Canada.

The loss of economic security experienced by newcomers relates not only to an actual loss of status or livelihood, as is experienced by some newcomers, it is also related to a loss of expectation or a loss of hope about the ease with which they will be able to establish their lives in Canada. Many newcomers, both refugees and immigrants, have hopes that they will be able to build a better life for themselves and their families in Canada. Many find themselves disappointed at the challenges and difficulty they experience in finding a suitable job with a sufficient income to support their family.

Newcomers experience multiple challenges related to employment and economic insecurity. Due to the inability to gain meaningful employment newcomers find themselves focusing their energy and time on material needs, rather than on their need for connection with their families and communities. Depending on individual circumstances, these challenges are related to the lack of recognition for their skills and education, or, as in the case of many refugees, their lack of formal education or work experience. In both cases, newcomer women face pressure to find jobs, but these barriers result in difficulty achieving that goal. Delia makes the point that migration is often related to a level of economic coercion where women abroad are ‘pulled’ to a country with the promise of a better life, but find themselves in difficult circumstances once they arrive. Due to the multiple barriers that they face in finding alternate employment, many newcomer women find themselves working in the service industry in so-called ‘survival jobs’ that pay very little and do not reflect the skills or knowledge of the women. When economic insecurity is the result of unequal access to opportunity and resources due to a group’s identity or identities, it constitutes structural violence and creates a barrier to well-being and social justice.



### **Loss of Personal Security and Well-Being**

**“There is a lot of stress, a lot of trauma, and they’re constantly worrying.”**

Further compounding the effect of economic insecurity is the experience of trauma and violence that is shared by many newcomer women. Understandably, refugee women have histories that are often punctuated by episodes of significant violence that they have personally experienced or have witnessed in their home countries and refugee camps. This may include direct acts of violence against themselves, as well as witnessing violence in their homes and communities. Various forms of violence, including gender-based violence, do not only exist in countries experiencing violent conflict. Women experience violence and gender-based violence in refugee camps, and in their homes in the suburbs of Winnipeg. While many women the world over experience violence, the meanings and response to such acts are dependent on context and the women’s social location.

As with economic insecurity, newcomer women’s loss of personal security or sense of well-being may relate to actual changes in their circumstances, to unfulfilled expectations of their hopes for a better life, or to the legacy of previous experiences of violence and trauma. These losses relate to a number of factors such as their personal history of violence and trauma, experiences of domestic violence in Canada, the negative consequences of a culture of silence that prevents women from speaking about the issues affecting them, and the trauma resulting from being separated from their family members abroad. These issues are all of a very personal nature and indicate the importance of having a support system in place for newcomer women to turn to.

## **Histories of Violence and Trauma**

Gender-based violence such as rape and sexual assault are associated with many armed conflicts in the world. Armies and individuals use violence against women to further political causes and spread fear among the population. Grace describes the history of violence and use of rape as a weapon of war in her home country of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC):

You know of the war? The war in Congo, in my country, in the 1990s? The war – the targets were women. So, [from] 1998 to now they never have changed the strategy. The strategy is rape. Rape has become a weapon. A terrible weapon to diminish, to destroy the entire community.

Most of the women who come, go through a lot of struggles, trauma. Many have gone through rape. Many have lost their husbands, have physical and emotional and mental trauma.

They come here. They don't have the same skills as me. I was lucky, I went to school, had a job. When I went to the refugee camp, I was speaking almost nine languages – Portuguese, French, English. I was able to find a job and take my family from the refugee camp to the city.

Other women, who have come just from the villages, have never been to school. They don't speak French. They only speak their language, their mother tongue. Can you imagine the level of trauma when they come here? They don't know French. They don't know English. They have never been to school. And they are single mothers. (Grace)

Gender-based sexual violence was used to destroy communities and weaken social bonds in DRC during the conflict. Women continue to live with the legacy of these experiences, even long after they have left the country. The effect of these traumatic experiences are compounded by the plethora of other challenges, such as lack of formal education and language training, that newcomer women contend with in Canada.

Other participants commented on their histories and experiences of gender-based violence in their home countries, refugee camps, and other places that they had sought refuge. Safia told me a story about living in fear of gender-based violence as a teenager after her family had fled to Iran. She stated that women were often targeted with verbal

and physical abuse in public spaces. One day she had to go out on her own in the evening to make a phone call:

So, [it was] late in the evening because of the time difference, and on the way back there was no bus. The bus time had stopped because the phone didn't go through for some time so I had to take a taxi.

And I was so afraid to take a taxi, because at that time it was not safe for girls to take a taxi if you were alone. If, for example, I had somebody with me, it's ok. I was about to cry because I was so afraid, and I didn't know if I would make it home in one piece. When you are afraid everything comes to your mind, all the worst cases.

There were people standing at the taxi stand, and there was a young couple. So I just followed them. And I told them that any taxi that [they] take, I'll sit with them so the driver will think that I'm with them. Anywhere that they get off, I'll get off and just walk the rest of the way because I didn't want to be in the taxi.

I was so afraid. But thank God that [my stop came] earlier than them. They went further. As soon as I [got] home I couldn't control myself and I started crying. I didn't know why, because of the stress or the fear.

And my Grandma said, "Why are you crying?"

And I said, "I was so afraid because of this. [...] Why should I have to go through all of this?"

And my Grandma told me, "[You] don't need a man to take care of yourself. You, yourself could be a man." And she said, "Never let someone put you under so much pressure that you get this scared. If this situation happened, for example, if tonight something happened in the taxi to you. Or if the guy wants to attack you or do things, you have hands too. You can defend yourself." (Safia)

Safia shared this story to describe some of the ways that her close family members – her grandmother, mother, and uncle – have influenced her to volunteer within her community and help others. It is a profound story as it contrasts the way that gendered discrimination sows the seeds of trauma and fear in women's lives, as well as illustrating the strength and agency that women possess in spite of these forms of oppression.

Previous experiences of violence and insecurity are, at times, contrasted with the perceived safety and security of the Canadian context in the narratives of the study participants. Mina explains that despite being confronted with challenges here, the

members of her community feel that they can at least expect a certain level of personal safety and security in Canada:

They come from a background where there is persecution, torture, and violence and they come to a peaceful place. Obviously for a majority of the members that I work with, they feel safe and have a sense of freedom and appreciate it. (Mina)

Many newcomers may enjoy a greater sense of security in Canada after experiencing war and persecution in their home countries. On the other hand, many newcomer women continue to experience violence after their arrival in Canada, sometimes in the form of domestic violence.

### **Domestic Violence in Canada**

Personal experiences of domestic violence can be very difficult to speak about.

Delia seemed hesitant at first to tell me about her experience of domestic violence, but quickly and without prodding, she described her memory of needing to stay in a crisis shelter with her young daughter:

After two years of migrating here, there we are. Myself and my daughter, we ended up in a crisis shelter. That was really tremendous because my daughter just had a surgery and she was a year and four months old. She had surgeries and it's not really easy.

I remember she started walking at the crisis shelter. She saw other kids, they were playing with each other. Although she had a surgery she tried to imitate them. Because her surgery is in her leg So it's really hard for them to do that. So she manages to walk. So, oh my gosh, you know? Maybe she's thinking to herself, "How come I just sit here, and I cannot run, cannot walk?" But my oldest daughter was so happy because that's where she started walking, in the crisis shelter.

You know what a crisis shelter is, right? It's a shelter for abused women. So, I've seen many women, immigrant women that time, it was a long time ago, like 18 years ago, who were there. (Delia)

While the emotional stress that that memory conjured for Delia was evident, her interview was also punctuated with much strength and determination. By telling the story

of watching her daughter learn to walk in the shelter, Delia is able to convey the hardship she experienced without needing to tell the details of how she came to live at the shelter.

Other participants also indicated that domestic violence is an issue among newcomer women. Selina notes that among the women who were gathering at her organization, over half of them had experienced, or were still experiencing domestic violence:

The [support group] emerged from just conversation we were having. Around ten of us. The women were facing abuse, physical abuse, and they couldn't talk about it.

They were scared to talk about it for fear that the husbands would send them back home. Or fear that CFS would come into the family and take away their children, and they would never see their kids.

So they were silent about these things, and they didn't want to talk about it because of fear. [...] Not to friends, nobody. It was just silent. And it was going on for so many times that the women just couldn't say anything.

So I did a workshop on abuse, different kinds of abuse. So that's why the women started opening up. So we had another circle, just talking, and we found out, [pause] I would say that that room had about nineteen people, and about seven of those women were facing abuse at that time. There were another four that had gone through abuse previously. (Selina)

Another important aspect of this comment is the recognition that physical violence is connected with isolation, silence, and fear. The women in this group experienced a number of fears relating to their identity as newcomers, and their experience of violence. They feared deportation, they feared separation from their children. These fears resulted in the silencing and isolation of the women experiencing abuse.

### **Silence as Violence**

The theme of silence recurred in many of the conversations I had with the participants. Silence was not always directly connected with physical violence, but reflected an overarching stigma against women speaking out in public about their lives, or the challenges that they are facing. Selina indicated that the women in her group were

silent about their abuse because of the fear of outside intervention by government agencies in their lives. Fear contributes to isolation that is compounded by a ‘culture of silence.’ I asked Anna if the people who attend her gatherings share stories about their challenges, and she responded that the sharing was tempered by both a culture of silence and the fear described by Selina:

Except for relationships, or marital relationships [...] even back home we were taught that issues between families should be kept within the family, you shouldn’t share that. So we still value that.

But then sometimes – maybe when it’s too, too much – someone will say something. But [they] won’t really elaborate [on] it, because they would feel that they’re guilty that they’re bringing something from their family. So it’s more of the things that they experience like employment, the basic things. But when you try to go deeper, people are hesitant. [...]

There is so many things that we are all facing, but no one would speak out, no one would share something. Especially, we were saying, we are in a culture of silence. Everything that is happening, no one would ever speak out because of the fear. There is so much fear, too. (Anna)

While family privacy may be important for many people, it becomes problematic when it hides abuse. Without knowing what other women are facing, women may feel isolated in their experiences and unable to connect their individual challenges with wider systemic barriers.

A culture of silence is not necessarily a patriarchal structure unless it hides the gendered violence that women experience and it silences women’s voices, in particular.

Astrida connected the culture of silence among her cultural community with patriarchal structures that elevate men’s voices at the expense of women’s:

The women were suffering a lot and they don’t have anyone to help. In our culture, they don’t have opportunity to speak, to talk. Like if you have a meeting, the men, they must talk. The women, they don’t talk. And for that, I think the women, they have lots of things to speak out, but because of the culture, they keep quiet.

The time I saw this in the refugee camp, I found the women, they were suffering. They don’t do anything, no one was helping them. So that time I brought them together so that they could do something. (Astrida)

Astrida acknowledges that it is not that women do not have important contributions to make; it is that their voices are silenced within a patriarchal culture. Silence can prevent women from discovering their shared hardships and can be extremely disempowering as they are left with few options to seek help or to create change.

### **Separation from Extended Family and the Need to Provide**

Another facet of trauma that is connected to both economic insecurity and isolation is the pressure placed on women and families who have been separated from their extended family members. Economic challenges are compounded by the responsibility that many families feel to their members who did not immigrate, or who remain in refugee camps abroad. I spoke to Delia a few weeks before Christmas and she noted that many newcomers feel significant pressure to support these extended family members, despite their meager salaries:

We also send money to our relatives in our home country. Especially in this season, they are waiting for gifts. That's another challenge for us. We try to maintain our lives here at the same time looking back. We want to help the people that we left behind, our relatives. (Delia)

The sense of being pulled between places and between homes can compound the sense of isolation and trauma that women experience.

Separation from family pulls newcomer women between these places, both emotionally and economically. Participants Safia and Natasha describe the stress and trauma that some newcomer and, particularly, refugee women, experience due to their inability to find meaningful employment while feeling financially responsible for their families abroad:

Most of them have to support their family members back home, in other countries and refugee camps, financially. So they have to generate some kind of income so they can give some money to them. [These are] all the challenges that they are facing here. And they don't have any way to find something to make some money. But, because of all these problems – language first, lack of skills, lack of market here – it's difficult for them. (Safia)

Families abroad may not fully understand the economic difficulties that newcomer women are facing in Canada and may contribute to the stress and hardship that these women experience when they are unable to find well-paying employment.

The inability to support both their families here and abroad may further increase their stress and trauma. This dilemma – the desire to support their families while having difficulty supporting themselves – is clearly illustrated by Natasha who discusses the situation of single mothers:

Without [a] husband – because a lot of the husbands passed away in the wars, or even some of them have gotten divorced – some of them have kids back home, back in refugee camps. There is a lot of stress, a lot of trauma, and they're constantly worrying.

And some of them tell me that they have to send money back home. And I say, "How can you send money back home when you don't have enough for yourself?"

"But what do you do when your brother tells you he lives in a refugee camp and he doesn't have enough money for food for his four children? What am I supposed to do?" (Natasha)

Newcomer women are connected in many ways to traumas that have occurred and continue to plague their families who have been left behind. While coming to Canada has presented a number of new obstacles, their connections with economic and political turmoil in their home countries have not ceased. Balancing these conflicting needs presents a continuing challenge for newcomer women.

A very personal hardship for many newcomer women is their loss of personal security or well-being as it relates to their experiences of violence and trauma. Many



women come to Canada with these experiences as they are fleeing violence, persecution, and war. Other newcomer women continue to experience violence in Canada, often in the form of domestic violence. These experiences and traumas are worsened by isolation and silence. A number of participants explained that it is difficult for newcomer women to find help or support because of cultural expectations of privacy, referred to as a culture of silence. Women also face the trauma of being separated from their family members who have remained abroad. These family members may be sources of support, spouses, and children. Newcomer women feel pressure to support these family members and send money back to them, even though they have difficulty providing for themselves or their families in Canada. These sources of hardship create additional barriers to well-being for newcomer women.

### **Conclusion: Experiences of Hardship and Loss**

While the interviews were not intended to focus solely on the challenges that newcomer women face, many of the participants spent a significant amount of time speaking about the hardships and losses experienced by newcomer women. Newcomer women are confronted with a loss of community, family, economic security, and personal security and well-being. These hardships take a number of forms that intersect and reinforce a sense of dehumanizing loss. The particulars of women's individual experiences of hardship differ based on their personal situation and social location, though it is through the intersection of these aspects of identity that women experience structural violence and hardship.

The loss of community and social support may be one of the first hardships that newcomer women identify after immigrating to Canada. They are confronted by many

challenges, not the least of which is the absence of family and friends to help with the transition. Further, newcomer women experience a loss of family through the literal geographical separation of family members and through the disruption of emotional connection between members of their immediate family in Canada. Conflict erupts between parents and children and between spouses as each member of the family negotiates and responds to change in different ways. These challenges are exacerbated by ever-present economic challenges and the loss of economic security as newcomer women experience difficulty finding jobs, and often end up working in low-paying, insecure forms of work. These economic challenges are a form of structural violence when they are rooted in the unequal access to opportunity and resources afforded to newcomer women because of their identity. Newcomer women also experience a loss of personal security and well-being through past and present experiences of violence and trauma

Mina noted that while the services provided by the various levels of government and social services agencies have been improving over the years, there remains a gap in acknowledging the specificities of the intersection of the oppressions that newcomer women face. Consequently, the lack of understanding of the structures and barriers that create hardships for women hide the extent of the trauma that newcomer women experience:

One of the things, if I want to be a little more critical, is that you see everybody through one lens. You don't see this person's need, or this particular category of women, or children. People are just people. And the extent of trauma. [...] If you don't take care of the trauma, whether it's minor or major, then you don't really address what they need. (Mina)

Taking care of the trauma, loss, and hardship that newcomer women experience involves responding to the needs of newcomer women, as identified by newcomer women. It also

involves addressing the structures in society that perpetuate inequality and structural violence. One aspect of acknowledging intersectionality is not only recognizing the various challenges that women face, but also acknowledging the strength and agency that newcomer women possess in spite of these challenges.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Agency and Empowerment: Newcomer Women as Everyday Peacemakers**

Along with challenges, newcomer women's expressions of agency emerged as a significant theme from the interviews. The study participants, practitioners in their field, acknowledge the negative experiences and challenges of newcomer women as well as the importance of supporting women in accessing their own strength to overcome these challenges. The idea of empowerment played a key role in each interview and was described by the majority of the participants as a main goal of their work. This chapter considers what the participants hope to achieve through their work with newcomer women, and how they connect their work with concepts or personal characteristics related to social justice. Much like MacGinty's (2013) everyday peace, and Scott's (1985) everyday resistance, the women in this study act as everyday peacemakers through their determination to support the women in their communities, and their pursuit of empowerment. The participants build safe spaces for newcomer women to gather and collaborate on the negotiation and construction of new meanings and norms that respond to their lived reality.

These concepts of agency and empowerment are explored in the following sections that indicate the ways that the women of this study act as everyday peacemakers. By focusing on voice, freedom, and resilience the women attempt to support and sustain the strength of individual women, and their communities at large. The participants also described particular personal characteristics such as empathy and patience that underscore efforts at creative problem-solving that fuel positive social change. Finally,

the chapter concludes with a discussion of how the study participants play a unique role in the community as they negotiate change and meaning with other newcomer women. The study participants are everyday peacemakers pursuing positive social change by helping newcomer women mediate between cultural influences and construct their own alternatives.

**Supporting Voice, Freedom, and Resilience:  
“When we’re together, we’re fully empowered.”**

Empowerment is a broad term and can encompass many characteristics, actions, and ways of being. The study participants commonly described empowerment and empowering activities as those that allowed women to have the opportunity to speak and be heard, and to feel free. Part of this entails responding to the various disempowering influences in newcomer women’s lives such as the feelings of confusion and fear about the Canadian context. By gathering together and supporting each other, the participants hope to encourage strength in individual women and in the community at large.

The participants were drawn to their work with other newcomer women for a variety of reasons. In part, the women described wishing to give back to the community by addressing some of the challenges and barriers they faced when they initially came to Canada. To challenge the sense of disillusionment and disempowerment that newcomer women experience after immigration, the participants focus on fostering confidence and strength among individual newcomer women, and in the greater community. An important aspect of this is breaking down the culture of silence and isolation by building women’s confidence in their voices and ability to speak out about their lives. Through

mutual respect, the participants pursue empowerment as a community activity – as something that all women in the community contribute to collectively.

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Many participants described feeling the need to give back to their community because of assistance they received when they arrived, or of trauma and difficulty they suffered when they originally came to Canada. These negative experiences inspired them to work with other newcomers to address the individual and systemic challenges that these women face. Salimah noted that while she had the benefit of some English language proficiency when she arrived, she still faced numerous challenges in accessing services and support while balancing the needs of her family:

Because when I [first] came to Canada, [I suffered]. I was a single mom. I was a little lucky at that time because I know a little bit [of] English at the time. But, I suffered enough to find the services, to find the resource, to understand the system by myself. It took time and effort, and that affected me and affected my children, too.

So if there is a center that gives information any time, we need it to help women. That is very good, especially in this area. (Salimah)

By experiencing these challenges first hand, Salimah and many of the other participants were able to identify needs within the community and the skills they had to offer that could meet these needs.

Mina explained that while the number of services that exist in the community to support newcomer women has improved since she arrived, some gaps remain. The work that she does in her community attempts to address some of these gaps, and has inspired others to create their own programs and organizations to meet the needs of newcomer women:

The way it started, when I came here, I saw that the services for refugees, or people who come from a refugee background, like when I came eleven years ago, it was very, very limited. And I think our city of Winnipeg is friendly, and they opened their arms to all the people who came from a diverse background.

But I think we had a place to come, but the system was not responsive to the need of the newcomers. The same way that it isn't today. We came a long way. There were things that I did for Afghan women. Now there are agencies that have actually built up, that do the work that we did for our community. So that's one of the reasons why we did this. (Mina)

The community itself is welcoming and has the desire for people to do well and succeed, but there needs to be institutions and support built into the community to ensure that people are given the chance to have a good life.

The personal experiences of some participants motivate them to advocate for and support newcomer women in order to smooth their transition into Canadian society. Fear has been noted as a major challenge for newcomer women. In their work, the participants attempt to provide guidance and support for newcomer women to dispel their confusion and fear about their new home:

These are our own experiences that we had when we came to Canada that we are trying to pass over to other people so they don't go through the same path of not knowing. So, we try to help them as best as possible. Sometimes when you come, if you don't have anyone to show you, or tell you what is expected of you. You really don't know anything. You don't know where to start. (Selina)

The experience of 'not knowing' provides a significant barrier to newcomers and feeds the fear that they experience as they navigate the many changes and challenges to which they are presented.

To support women in overcoming fear, confusion, and isolation, Safia works with newcomer women in her community to provide information and assist with daily activities. Safia describes her role as that of a dictionary, as she hopes to answer many of the questions and concerns of the women in her community:

For the family that I'm working – when I don't know a word, I go use the dictionary to find the meaning of the word so I understand it. So, for most of those families I'm like a dictionary. For each question they call me at work, or my cell, or at home. They have all the access. And if I tell them I don't know, I have to find out. [...]

I hear – I don't know how true it is – but, most of the families they kind of use me as a model for their children to go to school and go to work. You know, continue and do this or that. How do I see my role in the community? I try to help them as much as I could. (Safia)

By answering their questions and providing information, Selina and Safia work to support their community members and help them to avoid becoming isolated due to fear. They assist in empowering women by acting as a bridge during this transitional period by providing access to support and services.

### **Fostering Strength in Individuals and in the Community**

Some participants explicitly named empowerment as a central goal of their work while many described the desire to have women be able to experience a greater degree of freedom and have their voices heard in the community. Selina indicates that an important goal of her work is to empower women both economically and socially in order for them to become more independent in their lives. She connects her work with transnational experiences of gender oppression and activism:

One of my goals is for every woman to be self-sufficient, to be strong and to stand up. And just have that passion for women because women have been so oppressed all over the world, and women should be given that power to be who they are. People to recognize that they are a strong and formidable group. They too, can be part of a system to bring about change. That is my passion. Really empowering every woman. (Selina)

Positive social change is a goal for Selina, and it can be achieved by supporting all women to meet their potential. Women are a part of a wider effort for social change, a goal that cannot be achieved without their involvement.



Safia links the empowerment of women with building stronger families and communities. Many members of the community face challenges such as culture shock, by gathering and working together the women in the community can access collective strength to respond to many of these challenges:

My goal for my community is that women, or families, get enough education and find out about the proper services to be able to cope with all the different difficulties that they are facing here. Because everything is totally different from what they experienced, or they had, or they learned when they were growing up. Culturally, language, religion, coping with the weather. Everything is totally different.

So I would like to see the women to be active in the community and advocate on each other's behalf. Help each other, be active and contribute to the society that they're living in. (Safia)

Breaking down isolation and building social networks among newcomer women and their families is a goal shared among many of the women interviewed. Encouraging participation in these community activities allows women to gather, make friends, and help each other with the shared issues that they face.

While acknowledging that newcomer and refugee women are faced with a plethora of challenges when they arrive, it is essential to recognize the strength, agency, and knowledge that women have brought with them. Rather than viewing newcomer women as victims without agency, Anna emphasizes that newcomer women have the tools to make positive changes in their lives:

We have to educate people. That's another thing, too, education to people about their rights here. When you go here, it doesn't mean that your power of being you would be taken away from you.

We came here with strength right? It should be enhanced. It shouldn't be less, less, less. And just think that we have nothing. We have to start from scratch, literally, about life. But then the wisdom, the information, and the experiences that we've had [are] here. So it should be enhanced. (Anna)

Migration and resettlement can be extremely disempowering experiences as women are confronted with layers of structural barriers to well-being. Despite this, newcomer women's identities are far more complicated than that of mere victimhood. As Anna argues, individual strength can be enhanced by the community through collaboration and sharing information and resources.

### **Building Confidence in Women's Voices**

The women in the study often linked conceptions of empowerment with voice and strength. Supporting women in developing their voices and having the strength to speak out, and get out – literally from the house – directly confronts the challenges of silence and isolation that some newcomer women experience. Astrida expressed her vision and goal of empowerment by focusing on the ability of women to speak and be heard, and to make choices about their lives:

My goal is to see the women lead and have a good life. They can speak out whenever they want. In the meeting, sometimes you see the woman sit and be so quiet. And they have a lot of things to say. To help in the community, the woman has a lot of things to help the community, but because to be quiet, kind of to be quiet and afraid. *[pause]*

My goal is to help them to be open, to feel free. To help them to speak out whatever they want to say. To do what they want to do.

The women they have a lot of things to do, like crafts and crochet. The ideas, they can build something nice, but because of quiet, they can't do anything. Because of the culture, it makes them feel that they can't do anything.

So that for me, my goal is to go everywhere to find the women, to tell them to be together so that we can do something. Be free to talk, to do, to go everywhere so that they can be good. (Astrida)

The community loses out and is weakened by the absence of women's voices and ideas.

Astrida indicates that supporting women's empowerment by strengthening their capacity to speak and be respected in the community has a net benefit of further strengthening the community itself.

Voice and strength seem to be closely linked in the responses. Silence breeds fear and misunderstanding whereas the courage to speak out allows for collaboration and problem-solving. This sentiment is also shared by Anna, who explains that by challenging the culture of silence among newcomer women, the women themselves will benefit, along with their families and, arguably, the community at large:

For me, for us also, we would like to be part of their voice. Because there is so many things that we are all facing, but no one would speak out, no one would share something. Especially, we were saying we are in a culture of silence. Everything that is happening, no one would ever speak out because of the fear. There is so much fear, too.

I hope those could be addressed. And I hope that the group we have will be stronger, so that we reach the goal. Because for now maybe it's more of socialization, family gatherings, little information. But, little by little, it will go through one direction that has [a] bigger, bigger purpose that will not only benefit women, but families. (Anna)

By creating a foundation of trust and understanding through small gatherings and activities, Anna hopes to create wider change in her community. This may begin by encouraging women to speak about their experiences and share their insights and knowledge within a safe space that respects their desire for privacy.

### **Collective Resilience and Empowerment**

Newcomer and refugee women, in particular, are often labeled as resilient though, as argued by Pulvirenti and Mason (2011), this resilience is sustained through community support. The participants of this study also comment on the individual resilience of women they work with, and describe themselves as being in a supporting role. The participants, as practitioners and peacemakers, support newcomer women becoming empowered, not as a characteristic that is being given, but as one that is being reinforced by the community. Mina explains:

Another way that I'm inspired is the amount of resilience. These women and their families are resilient. They never give up. They survive. They survived to this moment.

If they feel they can't do something, I say that, "No, you can do that." So putting that power back to them.

Some women take time off, then they come back. The key for us is empowerment, when we're together we're fully empowered. (Mina)

Mina acknowledges that many of the women she works with are refugees and have experienced violent conflict and oppression. They have shown strength in their lives and have survived. Now, they can help each other access that strength by gathering, and working together.

Marina also makes note of the resiliency of the women she works with and how this relates to her role in the community. She notes that while she is in the position to provide support, it must be with respect for the knowledge and agency of the newcomer women she works with:

Well, from working with people, I think everyone has some resiliency in them. Often when we go through a difficult situation we lose faith in ourselves, we lose faith in others. But if there is just that one person that you can count on that is there to prevent any chaos that can happen, then that's good.

Some time[s] our participants may come for a one-time session and say, "These are the things that I need. How can I do it?" And provide them with guidance and trust that they are the best experts of their lives. Not me. The participants know what is best for them.

If someone went through a refugee camp, it's an intense experience. If that person was able to get out of that experience and be here today, who am I to tell them how they should live their life?

So what I learned is being open to other ways of living and respecting other's opinions. And knowing I can be the change agent, and support them where they are and give them some practical tools that they can use at home or at work. Then I'm there for them. (Marina)

Marina is able to be an agent of change not by forcing an explicitly political agenda, but by being an active and supportive member of the community. Strength is fostered within

the group, and among individuals by respecting the resiliency and agency of women and reflecting that back to them while providing practical support along the way.

The concept of empowerment was a key theme throughout the interviews. At its most basic, and most vital, empowerment involves the ability to freely live your life without fear and isolation, and to be able to speak out about your experiences. As facilitators of community activities and programs, the women of this study contribute to their communities by responding to their own experiences of hardship and attempting to make positive social change. They facilitate this change by supporting the women in their communities to recognize and feel confidence in their personal strength and abilities. Empowerment also entails having the strength and confidence to speak, and, in turn, being heard and respected. By supporting women in strengthening their voices, the participants of this study work to build the resiliency of individuals, who are supported by the wider community.

**Empathy, Patience, and Social Justice:  
“If you have patience, there are so many things you can achieve.”**

The women who participated in the study came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and have faced various challenges and degrees of hardship after arriving. Each of them navigated the system and are now in a position to mentor and support women who are just beginning their transition into life in Canada. Many of the women I spoke with empathized with the struggles of newcomer women, and wanted to ensure that people do not face the same difficulties as they had when they first arrived. Many described how patience was either an important characteristic to have in this line of work in order to build trust among the women in their community. Others described empathy

and patience as necessary to understand the perspectives of others, and come to solutions that fit the unique circumstances of individual newcomer women and their families. The characteristics of empathy and patience signal an orientation to social justice among the participants of the study. These characteristics show respect for newcomer women, and are key to creative, grassroots problem solving.

### **Building Trust and Developing Solutions**

As was described, the motivation for some participants for working and volunteering with other newcomer women was related to their own experiences of immigration and resettlement to Canada, and their ability to empathize with other women going through the same transition. Empathy and patience were also shown to be important for the participants as a way to build trust and show respect to the knowledge and experience of newcomer women. These characteristics are also key for developing creative solutions to the challenges that newcomer women experience that speak to the women's actual lived realities.

Empathy rooted in shared experience can be a powerful way to develop trust and relate with women experiencing hardship after immigration. Selina explains the importance of having these shared experiences:

If you find someone who has gone through it, that person will have empathy when they are dealing with you, because they will understand what it is that you are going through. Rather than somebody who has no clue what it means to be a refugee in a new country. (Selina)

There is space for allies in the community to support newcomer women in creating positive social change. It is important, however, to ensure that newcomer women themselves are the ones informing and leading these actions as they have an intimate

knowledge and understanding of their own challenges and needs, rather than an outsider's perspective. This sentiment was echoed by Salimah:

You grow up here you have different experience, different way you grow up. So you never, with my respect, you cannot feel what we suffered. (Salimah)

Their individual experiences may differ, yet newcomer women, whether migrants or refugees, can relate on the basis of having to integrate into a new cultural and geographic context. By building trust and understanding, the participants, as everyday peacemakers, are well placed to drive social change through grassroots activism.

Patience was described as another characteristic that sustained the participants in their work, and allowed them to develop methods of coping with the complex challenges that newcomer women experience. Some participants described patience as a valuable characteristic in their work as they require time to carefully assess situations and consider different perspectives before providing recommendations or advice:

I think if you really have patience, there are so many things that you can achieve. People will be more open to talking with you. People will feel that you have engaged them. That you are really listening to what they are saying.

Before, I think I was somebody that was really irrational. I would think something and – [*she acts as if she will jump out of her chair*]. Yeah, was that kind of person. But now I've learned that with patience over time, and if you give yourself time to analyze issues, you can always find a solution. That's why I don't rush into things anymore like I used to in the past.

I really give myself time, take a deep breath, analyze why did this happen? Should it have happened differently? What can I do differently next time? Sometimes you are faced with issues that you really want to [*pause*]. But, sometimes you just bite your tongue, and just say, "Ok, let me listen to this person's point of view."

Because everyone looks at things from different lenses, different perspectives. So my own perspective might not be the right one. So if I listen to somebody's and my own together, I might even scratch my own off and take the other person's. So that's why it's nice to have patience. (Selina)

Having patience allows you to build bridges despite difference, and is helpful to ensure that proposed solutions reflect the reality of those they are intended to benefit. Not only

does this characteristic allow the participants to consider perspectives outside of their own, but it also allows them to maintain their determination to contribute to positive change in the face of structural barriers. Practitioners in this field require patience to tackle these issues and take the steps necessary to make a significant impact on women's lives.

Many of the characteristics and perspectives exhibited and described by the participants suggest an orientation toward social justice. The centering of empowerment, along with prioritizing characteristics such as empathy and patience illustrate their focus on addressing not only individual challenges faced by newcomer women, but structural violence and oppression. Margot A. Hurlbert and James P. Mulvale (2011) define social justice as a situation in which "people have access to the things they need to live a secure and dignified life" (19). While the participants of this study hold different views as to the degree of social change that they would like to see, or the methods necessary to achieve it, each of them describe the empowerment of women as being a major goal in their work. These women work to address structural and systemic barriers to well-being by respecting the women in their communities, and supporting them in developing creative solutions to their complex problems.

**Negotiating Change as Everyday Peacemakers:  
"Adapt the good things. Not everything, but the good things."**

Underlying all of the challenges and hardships experienced by newcomer women are the dramatic shifts in context, geography, and culture that the women experience as they build new lives in Canada. How women conceptualize and integrate these changes into their practice and their lives are among the most compelling stories in the research.



As described by Sally Engle Merry (2006), culture is not static, but is fluid and internally contested within its context. Anna Snyder (2011a) and Denise Spitzer (2007, 2011) note that refugee and immigrant women face shifting roles due to conflict and resettlement that can be both challenging and empowering. Spitzer (2007) explains that newcomer women “create altered identities that enable them to sustain themselves in Canada” in the face of changing contexts, roles, and structural violence (60). Spitzer (Ibid.) emphasized that the conceptions of gender held by the newcomer women involved in her study had shifted, but had not been divorced from previously held cultural understandings.

As the context changes, so too does the identity and worldview of newcomers. This does not necessarily involve the wholesale rejection or acceptance of various cultural narratives regarding gender, but the construction of new understandings and ways of being that are rooted in the individual’s own worldview. The participants of this study are everyday peacemakers in that they help newcomer women negotiate these changes, while mediating and co-constructing new meanings and norms collectively. The participants build bridges across difference using diplomacy and respect to engage members of their communities and foster positive social change that responds to the women’s lived realities. By exploring and negotiating these changes together, the participants pursue peace, provide a space for voice, and create the impetus for positive social change among the women in their community.

### **Constructing New Meanings**

A few participants mentioned that they encourage the women in their groups to look for positive aspects both in their home culture and in the ‘Canadian’ culture (acknowledging that all cultures are diverse) in order to find solutions for some of the

challenges that they face. Marina illustrates her role in mediating various cultural influences with the women in her community by describing some of the community activities that she participates in:

Once a month I will call whoever is available to come. We will have a culture sharing of our own culture. We will make home country food. We will teach our kids some of our culture, dancing. How to approach elders from our culture, what to say.

With that it's informal, no structure. In some immigrant communities, counseling is taboo, but sharing around the table, sharing around the drumming or singing is a way of doing counseling.

So through that sharing I try to support them as much as I can or connect them and encourage them to seek help and to reassure them that it's okay. So, balancing of our own culture and also integrating into Canadian culture so you don't feel isolated, or feel deprived from anything. And maintaining your identity at the same time. (Marina)

These gatherings allow community members to engage in the transmission of cultural norms and values to their children. They are also useful opportunities for Marina to engage in her role as an unofficial social worker, hearing the concerns and troubles of women in the community under the guise of 'just talking.'

In the course of her interview, Marina had also described herself as a 'change agent' who promotes empowerment among the women who come to her organization.

Marina elaborates on this idea by describing the concept of a 'change agent' and what this means in her advocacy work with newcomer women:

That means – it can be anything from knowing how to take the bus. Anything from how I can maintain my own culture. How I can maintain my home culture, and pass it onto my kids. While, at the same time, also allowing my kids to integrate into Canadian culture without feeling like my kids are being separated from me.

It can be anything from me just giving them the voice that they need to be heard, to be supported, to feel that they're informed. Regardless of what they did in the past, as youth. [...] They still deserve a second chance in life. So if I can be there for them so they know and not fear that I am there to judge. And so they can be empowered. (Marina)

Marina sees her role as a change agent involves helping women maintain their culture and identity while also adapting to their new context and building their sense of confidence and independence. The study participants and the women they work with negotiate this dynamic in their own way.

The balancing of cultural norms and expectations is exemplified by the process of melding various aspects of culture and practice together in order to alter and construct new narratives. Anna explains that while some newcomers feel pressure to abandon their cultural practices and values after coming to Canada, a balance can be struck:

The struggle of cross-cultural adaptation. Because oftentimes people think that when you're in a new country you have to leave everything behind as I've mentioned.

Yet, everything that is in here, every time things happen. "This is Canada. This is the way that it is."

But it isn't. You have the choice to preserve whatever you value from your own country. And then to adapt the good things. Not everything, but the good things. (Anna)

Assimilationist influences in Canada can lead to pressure to adopt 'mainstream' Canadian cultural practices or values. Anna argues that there are many rich and valuable traditions, ways of being, and worldviews that are not necessarily represented in the Canadian 'mainstream.'

The process of altering culture and practice is evident in the example provided by Astrida where she describes discussions among the group of newcomer women that gather with her. The women are from a variety of backgrounds, and they discuss, among other things, how they raise their children and how to integrate different methods from different contexts:

Other times we learn how to raise up our children. Even here, there is a lot of cultures. But I have my culture, and you have your culture.

And so we say, “Ok, people from Burundi, how do you raise up your children?” So then they tell us how they raise up [children] in their culture. “And what about the women from Congo?” And they raise up another way.

And we talk about what is good. And we say, “Ok, you know Canadian people, they raise up like this. And you guys, what do you think about that?”

And they say, “Yeah, the Canadian people, they have some good.” And take that some good, and put in your good, and you raise up your children like this.  
(Astrida)

This example is particularly apt given that most participants discussed the challenge of intergenerational conflict and issues with childrearing in Canada. The women who attend this group may all face challenges with their children, and feel pressure from governmental institutions to change their parenting style. Gathering together can be an opportunity for women to recreate meaning, and to challenge and change practices and values.

### **Building Bridges in the Community**

The participants describe engaging in their own form of peacemaking in various ways. While some participants are more conservative in their approach to social change, others are explicitly activist. Mina describes herself as being a revolutionary and as someone who is willing to push the envelope in favor of women’s rights and social justice. At the same time, she mentions the importance of building bridges with members of the community who may not be as progressive nor share some of her perspectives:

At the beginning I thought it was challenging. I’m not a typical Afghan woman who is leading something like that.

I also challenge men in the community for some of the things that they do. If they are coming from a very conservative society, and I grew up in a pretty progressive, liberal society, so that was a challenge.

But they needed something, somehow. And I was liked, or welcomed. You have to be a diplomat in your role. You’re serving your community. You have to reach out to the men. [...]

Each and every step, people ask if I’m exhausted. The energy keeps running.

At the end of the day I say that even if only two women come, we make a difference in each other's lives. I learn from them. They learn from me. I'm teaching them how to be a Canadian mother. They're teaching me how to be an Afghan mother. I'm learning a lot from these women. And I know that some of the social skills we learn from each other, and I think I've become a role model for some of the younger women. (Mina)

Mina maintains her determination to see improvement in the lives of the Afghan women she works with. She also acknowledges that the sharing that occurs among the members of her group enriches her life.

Over the time she has spent in Canada, Mina has seen many changes in the social relations and norms in the Afghan community. She provides some examples of how social change is occurring in her community and her role in fostering that change:

I always see myself as one of those revolutionaries. I see that some of the things that I did, some young members or some families are doing that. That [had been] criticized or not being seen as a positive thing. Too revolutionary for us. [...]

Now I have women come to me to show me that they're wearing their scarf. You can still wear your scarf, but you have to take care of yourself. In our culture, taking care of yourself is seen as egocentric or selfish. That you do for yourself. There is always that collectivism. I say that you can go for a cup of coffee, take a break from your family, you can actually do that. [...]

For example, we talk about divorce. In the culture it's not a good thing. We do a lot of group work with the community. We never had a platform that we need to talk about that. But, [now] we talk about how divorce is okay. The young generation now talks about love marriages. When I came, that didn't happen. [...]

Part of the thing that I do, they bring an issue, a social issue, or a family problem, I don't say "Wow, this is disgusting." I just say, "Well, this is great. Let's talk about it." (Mina)

Through her community group, Mina endeavors to create an open and safe space for women to gather and speak about their experiences, and their thoughts about these changes. While Mina may not share the same views as some members of her community, she pursues social change while remaining respectful of difference, and maintaining relationships in the community.

## Negotiating Change, Pursuing Peace

Perhaps not surprisingly, gender roles and patriarchal institutions were mentioned as potential sources of division, as well as locations of positive social change for the participants. The participants note that by reaching out to women and supporting them in negotiating and mediating these various cultural influences there will be a wider social benefit beyond the lives of individual women, to their families and their communities.

Salimah explained that due to the economic insecurity that many newcomer families experience, women must devote more time to paid employment outside of the home, increasing their burden of work while raising children. The family and gender dynamics between spouses and their children must change in order to accommodate this new reality:

I told you, we came from a community, men community, the men is the leader. Male is the king there, [that's how] we treat them. [...] But now I'm suffering because I do everything for them, because they are men.

But I realize here in Canada, there is no time. If they don't help me, at least to rearrange their rooms, I have no time for everything if I am working.

So, we need to educate ourselves to be independent as women, as newcomers. After that, the mom, if you teach her, she will teach the children. Boys and girls, both of them the same. (Salimah)

This change in family dynamics reflects the reality for many newcomers who face economic insecurity. Gender dynamics within the family may change due to the shifting cultural context, and they may also be influenced by material necessity of requiring a dual income in the family.

As indicated by Salimah, education plays an important role in fostering positive social change among newcomers. Salimah emphasizes the importance of supporting and empowering women as a way to promote and transmit this social change to their children:

If I was government, I would say if I need a new generation, new educated generation, educate the mom. If there's an opportunity, in their language if they cannot speak English. Let her understand her rights, and express her rights. She will teach that to the children, she will live a happy life. (Salimah)

Salimah sees women as taking a leading role in their families to construct new meanings, and transmit these values and norms to their children. By empowering women through education, they may be able to become agents of change within their own families.

With some participants, the balance between empowerment and the maintenance of some aspects of patriarchal social expectations was less clear. Astrida found that while some women in her community were asserting independence and power in their relationships, this was causing conflict in their marriages. In this case, Astrida wished that women would, at times, “just obey” in order to avoid conflict and maintain the unity of the relationship. At the same time, Astrida also presents a powerful call to action for women to be empowered and act in solidarity to challenge oppression and promote peace:

The young ladies, they go to the school and they focus for the issues for women so that they can help. I say in our country, or in Africa, you can find a woman that is president. You can find a woman that is in the top. You can be someone.

In our culture, just the women, they sit at home, but now you must learn. And learn how to deal with the problems of women, so that can be better for women. You can stand up for women. For that, if you stand up for women, we will have peace everywhere. If only men stand up, nothing can happen. [...] Why? Because we are crying out, through our heart.

In Canada we are better here, we are crying out that we can remain in peace. For that, we can live in peace. If we just sit there and think everything is free, no one knows. But if we are crying out together, then we can remain in peace. (Astrida)

Astrida is obviously very passionate about promoting social change that empowers women. She is also influenced by her culture and religion that embrace patriarchal interpretations of institutions like marriage. When talking among the women in her

community, all members are able to consider these dilemmas and negotiate the changes in their lives in a way that speaks to their lived reality.

Astrida's call to cry out for peace is indicative of the need to continue pursuing the goal of positive peace even after threats of direct violence are over or have been significantly reduced. Structural violence, and various forms of oppression and hardship continue to create barriers to well-being for newcomer women. Astrida calls for women to stand together and support each other in challenging oppressive structures and institutions. While migration or resettlement to Canada presents numerous challenges, it also presents potential opportunities to act on the goal of empowerment and pursue social justice.

### **Conclusion: Newcomer Women as Everyday Peacemakers**

The varying aspects of hardship, loss, agency, and empowerment described by the women of this study all point to the nature of change and transition affecting the lives of newcomer women and their families. The participants have experienced aspects of these challenges and changes in their own unique ways, and are now involved in supporting other newcomer women in navigating and negotiating this transition. These women come from various ethnic, cultural, religious, socio-economic, and political backgrounds, thus they also approach the topic of empowerment in unique ways. As much of their work is rooted in the desire to see other newcomer women 'feel free' and become empowered, these participants are everyday peacemakers promoting social justice through their work at the grassroots.



In describing their roles in the community, the participants of the study emphasized the importance of helping women access the strength that is within them, and promote a feeling of freedom and well-being. This is done by showing respect for newcomer women and providing them with an avenue to build their confidence in their voices and in themselves. This perspective acknowledges that while newcomer women are faced with numerous challenges, they also have strength and agency, which can be supported and sustained by the community. The community is, in turn, strengthened by the existence of these recreated webs of support. To develop these spaces, the participants build trust with the women in their communities by showing empathy, patience, and the willingness to collectively develop creative solutions to these challenges. By facilitating these gatherings, the participants, as everyday peacemakers, help newcomer women negotiate change, and construct new meanings and norms that reflect their reality and are not imposed from the outside.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Community Development: Creating the Space for Connection, Friendship, and Positive Social Change**

To achieve their goals of supporting newcomer women and promoting women's empowerment, the participants were involved in a variety of different projects and activities. These gatherings provide an opportunity for women to support each other in coping with the challenges that they face, and to collaborate to find creative solutions to problems. They also assist in re-building and re-creating a sense of community among newcomer women. The participants create a safe space for women to gather and speak about their experiences while building useful skills. Social change and women's empowerment are driven by the creation of these hidden spaces that allow women to navigate the changing dynamics of gender roles and expectations within a safe and inclusive environment. These women work at the grassroots to create and support positive social change in their communities by creating safe spaces and encouraging women to speak about their experiences. Through these actions, the women weave back together the strands of their webs of support and create new relationships and communities.

This chapter explores the women's conceptions and definitions of the concept of community that, while variable in composition, all reflect values related to social justice such as support, fairness, and belonging. The chapter also discusses the women's perspectives on grassroots organizing and how they approach grassroots community-building and social change. This section is followed by a review of the participant's strategies for pursuing positive social change through community-building with

newcomer women. The participants engage in economic development with women in their community by helping women build and hone their skills and engage in entrepreneurial, income-generating activities. Furthermore, the participants also focus on social development in these groups by creating safe spaces for women to gather and speak about their experiences and thoughts. Storytelling is used to raise consciousness about shared challenges and create an opportunity for collective problem solving. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of the concept of constrained empowerment and an exploration of the sites of resistance used by the women in this study.

**Conceptions of Community:  
“One finger can’t wash a face.”**

The significance of community that has been discussed in this paper has been in terms of the role that community plays in providing a web of social support, and the participants’ perceptions of the change or disruption to these sources of support since their immigration to Canada. Eriksson (2011) notes that community can be defined in a number of ways, including as group with common values, a common context, or common interests (405). When I asked the participants to describe what community means to them, the participants also provided a number of complex definitions and explanations.

Some participants described community as being based on sameness, while others described constructed communities that are built on diversity, and that people choose to be a part of. Whether their definition of community involved diversity or similarity, the women described community as being rooted in the values of support, fairness, and belonging. Lederach (1995) asserts that the empowerment of the individual is bound to the empowerment of the collective and that these processes are interdependent (21). The

programs and activities that the participants are involved in attempt to promote the values of support, fairness, and belonging while providing an opportunity for newcomer women to gather and feel welcome. These values, along with the centering of women's empowerment reflect a social justice perspective and create a foundation for grassroots activism and community building.

### **Community as Sameness**

To probe the understanding of community held by the participants, I asked a very simple question, "What does community mean to you," and I received some interesting and surprising answers. Some women spoke about the values associated with community, while others defined the makeup of a community. A few participants stressed the importance of commonality within communities. Commonality, or sharing language, culture, or religion among other aspects of identity, was seen as a way to build trust and strengthen relationships.

As Natasha explains, having common ground such as a shared belief system can create the trust and familiarity necessary for building social relationships. Natasha describes her organization as a place where Muslim women from various cultures and traditions can gather to create a sense of community and to share their experiences:

First of all, they come and they find a woman that they can talk to. Keep in mind that the majority of the women that come are single women. Their husbands have been killed in the war, or they're divorced. They're on their own with three, four, five kids.

It's much easier for them to come if they feel another woman can understand them, and know what they're going through. So it's easier for them to talk to a woman than talk to a man. Just to know that there was a Muslim organization where they can come is a great sense of relief for them.

And it doesn't matter what country they come from because once they hear Muslim, then there's something in common. Because the cultures and practices in all the different countries are very different. Their dress, their food, even the way

they bring up kids, anything. There's a lot of differences, but it's a commonality when they have the faith. (Natasha)

In describing her organization, Natasha points to the isolation experienced by newcomer women, and the importance of building their confidence to speak freely about their lives. Her organization provides an outlet for Muslim women to build relationships and seek support from the community.

While similarity can be helpful for building trust initially, Natasha acknowledges that gathering women together from different backgrounds can be helpful to create new relationships. These differences can help combat some of the issues related to small communities such as gossip:

For some of them, it's nice to talk to someone that's not in their community. Because for confidentiality, they don't want a lot of things spreading around the community. It's better if it's somebody outside of their community, but similar to them. So they find that they can gain that here. (Natasha)

Key to this conception of community is the importance of having a place for women to gather and freely share their thoughts and experiences in a safe, and understanding space. While sharing some similarities are useful in building trust, having the opportunity to talk with strangers or outsiders may allow women to feel free to speak when they may have otherwise kept silent about their thoughts or experiences.

Other participants shared similar thoughts about community and finding utility in both sameness and difference. Astrida initially described the members of a community as necessarily being homogenous in terms of culture and religion. However, she also notes that this conception of community has been complicated by migration and resettlement to the multicultural Canadian context:

For me, I see the community as family. Like a family. If it's a family I mean, the family must have one culture, they can speak one language, they can – . Yeah, the

community, the way the people meet, they have one culture, one spirit. I mean one religion in the churches.

For the community, like the Burundi community, they must speak Kirundi. They must take their culture from God. [...] They talk the same language, like that. That's how I see the community. [...]

For example in this area, the people living here [are] from Congo. Or Aboriginal people, or people from Burundi. For them to live together is not easy. That's why I'm here for this job. To help them to understand them, to be together with them. For that, we can connect with them. For that, they can be integrated into this bigger community. They can learn some culture from them, and they also can learn from them. Together they can be a new community.

While Astrida is clear that 'community' means sameness, she also indicates that her role involves helping women interpret different cultural influences, and alter their own worldview in the face of their changing cultural context. This can be seen as an example of an 'everyday' coping mechanism intended to prevent conflict in diverse neighborhoods.

I asked Astrida whether it was a challenge to bridge difference among the group of women that gather with her. She responded that it was, but it also presents an opportunity for women to learn from each other and build friendships that they may not have otherwise formed:

Yeah, before there are some challenges. [...] Before, I was thinking I would make a group for only people from my community, where I come from. But, after a time, I find that some women need help. And if I do only people from my country, I would not be honest. I would not reach my goal.

That's why I open my door for every woman. [...] And I say, "We have a lot of things we can learn from them. [...]" So we learn from each other. And now they're ok. They're friendly, little bit friends. They have a party, for example, people from Somalia. If they have a party, they can say, tell the people from Rwanda, "Please, can you make this for me?" If I make food for them, I would not make food from Somalia or Eritrea, no. I cook the food from my country and feed it to them. [...] They become friends, no problem. (Astrida)

While Astrida sees the benefit of gathering in a community built on sameness, she also sees this as a challenge to her goal of women's empowerment. By creating a safe space

for newcomer women in her neighborhood, they are able to gather over food and share their culture and experiences, thus constructing a new, inclusive community.

### **Constructed Communities**

Some of the participants stressed the importance of supporting diversity within their communities. These participants seemed to suggest that community is what you make of it, based on your location, rather than shared histories or cultures. Safia explains that the makeup of her community has necessarily changed due to resettlement because of the breakup of families from death and separation. Due to these disruptions, the Afghan community is becoming reconstructed and recreated in the Canadian context:

Here, in Canada, or let's say in Winnipeg, most of – . We don't have any family members here. I don't have any relatives here in Manitoba. Most of families are the same as us. I think I became, for me, if I defined community, it doesn't just include the Afghan community, or the community that speaks the same language, which is Iran.

For me, I think all of my friends, or Winnipeg, is a bigger community and the Afghan community is a small branch inside there. I think that's my definition of the community here.

I've been out during this year in Winnipeg that I'm living, I think Winnipeg is community. It doesn't matter. My work with different people, from different backgrounds, mostly refugees. [...] So for me, the whole Winnipeg is a community. My community. (Safia)

Safia takes ownership of the community that she has created for herself in Winnipeg by making friends and broadening her network through work and volunteering. The women and families that she shares a history with from Afghanistan comprise a branch on the broader community to which she now belongs.

A constructed community that is based on interests, not necessarily shared histories or culture, requires the group members to take ownership of this identity as they are not necessarily born into it. Selina reflects this idea of the constructed community by

explaining that community is something that is built and sustained by the members – who may or may not share similar aspects of their identity. These members reach out to each other to offer support and build relationships:

Community is everything. Even a house is a community. Your family is a community. But when you reach out to other people, when you meet other people from other families, from other walks of life, you congregate together, you come together, you put ideas together, you try to work together. Your neighborhood.

You can start something in your neighborhood. Like a great night in your neighborhood. Just going from door to door, just checking on your neighbor. That is community. Two or three people coming together from different walks of life, to share ideas, to share passions, to share goals. (Selina)

This constructed community harkens back to the participants' descriptions of collective or communal cultures. The sense of togetherness elicited from this comment stands in stark contrast to previous descriptions of isolation and loneliness.

Selina warns that the absence of community creates or intensifies problems associated with isolation such as depression. Empathy for your neighbors and the hardships they are experiencing is at the core of building community:

Because no man is an island. When people are just on their own, we see all the depression that creeps in. We see all the frustration that creeps in. It's not healthy. But when you have somebody even to say hello to you, that relaxes you. [...] That will put a smile on your face.

I think that is very important, to see people reaching out to other people. People that are in need. People that are crying. Just to help your neighbor to go do groceries for them. That is very important. We are sharing the same space, right? If they are unable to do it, and we are able to do it, why wouldn't we help out? (Selina)

This comment also hints at Selina's desire to make positive change in her community. If she sees someone experiencing hardship and difficulty, she will attempt to help in whatever small way she can.

Selina's sense of community is based on the people living in the neighborhood, gathering together and helping each other. Salimah also wishes to create a stronger



community in her neighborhood by working with newcomer women who live downtown. Salimah stated that her goal for the future includes creating a space for all women to come together to socialize and support each other. As newcomer women face similar challenges, Salimah feels that it is important to ensure that all women have access to support and services regardless of their origins or background:

From the first day, I see the place as a center for women. Not just Muslim women. Women. A group where women help women. If she wants to spend time to chat, to ask. I see our center not just for Muslim women, but for every woman in the community because we live inside the community. Different religion, different tradition also. I told them maybe a center for women [to] help especially newcomers and single moms. (Salimah)

Salimah's comment reflects the perspectives raised by a number of participants that if she only included women from her background, she would be letting down all of the other newcomer women who need help and support. The shared experience of being newcomer women is what holds these groups together, and gives them meaning as they pursue social change.

Gathering together based on shared history, culture, and religion helps foster a sense of trust and belonging. Creating diverse communities promotes inclusiveness and facilitates sharing knowledge and perspectives across difference. There is legitimacy in both perspectives regarding the makeup of community. There is also space within civil society to accommodate gatherings that are defined by these perspectives. What gives these groupings strength and meaning are the values that are embedded within them.

### **Strong Communities and Social Justice**

The sense of belonging that is implicit in the descriptions of community provided above is sustained by the empowerment of its members both individually and

collectively. Women's agency and empowerment can be supported by communities that value social justice, and its related characteristics such as fairness and belonging.

Lederach (1995) asserts that transformative peacemaking involves the interdependent processes of the empowerment of individuals and the strengthening of community (21).

Through their community-building work, the participants act as peacebuilders by creating inclusive spaces that are rooted in the values of social justice.

A core characteristic or goal of social justice is fairness. Delia describes community not in terms of its membership, but in terms of the values of fairness and sharing:

I can only define a community if every member of the community has a fair opportunity, fair treatment. It's all about fairness in having the same opportunities that will be given to all. [...] Defining community is more of a sense of belonging and having the freedom of doing what you want to do. That way you can empower yourself and the rest of the people. (Delia)

For Delia, community is characterized by fairness in opportunity afforded by the support and "collective strength" of the community. This perspective harkens back to the communal worldview discussed previously, and Lederach's (1995) theory of transformative peacemaking.

Marina and Grace emphasize the importance of the collective strength that is bound by inclusive communities. Social change is driven by collective action; therefore, positive social change is built on the foundation of a strong community. Marina explains that the well-being and empowerment of the individual is tied to that of the community:

Community? It's the same as the African proverb, 'it takes a community to raise a child'. It takes a community to make a change. It takes a community to have a better life.

I can live on my own, having everything, but somewhat in me, something will be missing. The way I was brought up I know that I can knock on the next door anytime. I don't need an appointment, I don't need to call. I can just show up and I know there will be a cup of coffee ready for me. That's community. Living together and helping each other. (Marina)

A few of the participants suggested that the freedom to connect with other members of the community over food or coffee, without feeling that they are a burden, or need to make an appointment, was a symptom of a healthy community. Connection, rather than isolation, is necessary to transform relationships and pursue change.

Grace also reflected this idea, and emphasized the importance of connection and collaboration. This perspective is succinctly relayed in Grace's analogy of washing a face:

So I believe strongly in collaboration. That one finger that washes the face – that's what we do in our country, that's what we say – one finger can't wash a face. You need the five, or the ten, to take the water. Not like here where you open the tap and the water comes down. In the villages you put the water in the basket and you need to take it to wash your entire body. How can you wash with one finger? So you need connection, you need partnership, you need collaboration. (Grace)

This analogy not only points to the utility of working as a group in order to achieve a goal, but it hints again at the sense of loss of this way of life experienced after immigration. In Canada, individualism takes precedence in the mainstream culture, yet there is still room for collaboration, and much need for it as well.

Similarly, Mina discusses the altered nature of the Afghan community within the Canadian context, and how their collective culture is able to support the empowerment of women. Benefits at the individual level can have a positive impact on all members of that community, along with the wider 'mainstream' community in Canada:

The culture that I come from, it's collective. Community means to me a central alliance, or something. We're all part of that group. Men, women. You have that network of that community around you, that is a lot easier to feel that you're not alone.

I see community as a circle. We're all sitting together, we all have the same sort of power. It's a learning and sharing thing around that circle. I believe that if you have a healthy and strong community, it's beneficial to everybody. Beneficial

at the individual level, family level, and the other society, the larger society, the mainstream.

They have pride of having that particular community, within their community. I know Canada is a multicultural society. They allow individual groups or cultures to maintain their thing, but at the same time we're part of a larger society. So if you're part of a good, strong community, you can be better. You can strive more, achieve more.

The impact on your children. If you have a healthier community, your children have that support. It's a support group that you can count on, go on, you can trust, share things.

The network, the community of women, that's what we do. We're all the same, above and beyond the women's group, black, white, north, east, south. We all have that commonality. We all have issues that are impacting us. Some of us have a different thing, because we are fortunate, but at the end of the day we are all part of that network. (Mina)

While the women share a common history, originating from the same country, there are still cleavages that set them apart. Above all, the women share the experience of being newcomer women who face similar challenges in their new home. Having a supportive community to turn to for connection and support is very important during this time of transition.

Some of the descriptions of community provided by the study participants seem to indicate their wishes and goals for their communities as opposed to the actual realities with which they are faced. Grace discussed some of the divisions and conflict that exist in her community that have followed them through their resettlement experience. Her description, and hope for her community involves overcoming these barriers and divisions in order to promote the empowerment of both individual members, and the collective itself:

The community is what makes a society, what makes a country. If you want to see Canada a good country, you need to have a strong community. And if you want to see a strong community, you need to have community members. And if you want to have strong families and communities, you have to have strong women. [...]

So this is how I would like to see my community. Strong, united, healthy, without this division, gossip. This will not be completely finished because we are human beings, but how we can overcome these issues and come together. (Grace)

While some of these definitions and descriptions of community may be idealized versions of reality, they further indicate the importance of social justice and empowerment to the participants. The women are helping form new and altered communal bonds with other newcomer women through organizations and activities that are rooted in the values of support, fairness, and belonging.

Asking the simple question of what community means to the study participants elicited a wealth of information about their values, and their goals for the women in their communities. Clearly, the women who are drawn to this work hold the values of social justice such as fairness, belonging, empathy, and support in high regard. Many of their descriptions or explanations of community appear to have become ‘altered’ as they create new meanings in the Canadian context. While community can be defined through similarity and shared history or culture, many of the participants acknowledge the benefits associated with diversity as well. No matter how their group or community is defined, the participants act as ‘everyday’ peacemakers who endeavor to create social change through the support and empowerment of the women they work with. The following sections will discuss how the participants pursue these changes.

### **Grassroots Organizing:**

**“It’s about the sense of belonging and ownership of the group.”**

Whether the women involved in the study work in established organizations, or volunteer their time to smaller-scale community activities and gatherings, their activities are based on a grassroots approach. The support that they provide reflects the needs

existing in the community as identified by other newcomer women. Lederach (1995) explains that empowerment is tied to the inclusion of local participants in the identification of problems, needs, and appropriate responses that utilize local knowledge and resources (32). This perspective is reflected in the statements made by a number of participants as they describe their role as ‘informal’ leaders who share leadership with other members of the community, and identify issues and needs with other newcomer women in the community. Through these means, the participants are able to identify and respond to the needs of the community within their ever-present budgetary constraints.

### **Sharing and Nurturing Leadership**

Rather than positioning themselves as experts or leaders in their communities some of the participants emphasized that they are informal leaders and share responsibility for identifying needs and resources in the community with the women that attend their groups. Marina clearly rejected the role of ‘expert’ by stating, “they know what is best for them. I may think that what the book tells me is best, but they know [...] they are the experts of their lives” (Marina). This statement links Marina’s goal of empowerment with the method of grassroots community building.

Delia also embraces the role of informal leader and emphasizes the respect she offers to the women who come to her group. She explains that the women know their own needs the best, so they are best suited to decide what programs or support they need:

Coming together as a group can mean anything for any women, for any individual. [...] Normally I would ask them which program they would want to do. You ask them – talking about the experts, they are the expert. So they have to decide which program suits their needs. [...]

It’s also about the sense of belonging and ownership of the group, I want them to feel more comfortable in talking, and that’s how you start gathering stories from the people. (Delia)

By showing respect for the women who come to her group, Delia is able to build trust, and encourage them to open up and speak about their experiences. By positioning themselves in this way, Marina and Delia remove themselves from the role of the expert while acknowledging the skills that they have to offer. Namely, they have the motivation for change, and the ability to support and actively listen to newcomer women. This perspective shows respect for the knowledge and abilities of the newcomer women who attend their groups, affirming that they all have the ability to make valuable contributions to the collective.

Anna explains that sharing leadership is not only important for ensuring the continuity of the group, but also to incorporate various perspectives and viewpoints into the planning process for the activities and projects undertaken by the group. Continuous and positive social change is ensured by the commitment and determination of the members:

The other thing that I learned is that even if you're in this place right now, when the community sees you as an informal leader, you still have to continue developing some more leaders in your community so it will follow, it won't stop. But of course, there will come a time when I feel I need to stop, or something will happen. I don't know what could happen.

I feel that these people that [have] been developed, or [have] the same initiative just like you, you will be assured that it will go from generation to generation. I want that, I wanted that to happen. I don't want all the information to just stay with me. I want to share it with more people. [...] When we get together we share that ideas and you feel that this is what we wanted, so let's go for it. [...]

It's really good when you find those people that are really solid, have that motivation of having that pure service. Because there will be people who will be there, but then they will have hidden motives for themselves. But if you see that people really wanted to help, that genuineness is important. (Anna)

Anna explained that “pure service” meant an altruistic determination to see the lives of other improved without expecting to receive a benefit yourself. She was concerned that

some people chose to do this work for selfish reasons, hoping to gain financially or socially by taking advantage of newcomers. Finding people to work with who exemplify that “genuineness” was very important to her.

Connected to this perspective, Anna also holds a high degree of respect for the members of her community. She emphasizes that valuing the abilities of all members of the group is central building their confidence:

I would like to maintain the equality of everyone. That no one is above the others because we are all contributing. We have our own roles in the group. I might be the person that they go to, but each one has different strengths too, that we all have to work on and cherish. (Anna)

As individuals become empowered and confident in their abilities, they are able to further support each other and ensure that the resources that exist within the community are being utilized for the benefit of the collective.

### **Responding to the Needs of the Community**

Planning and creating programs and activities from the grassroots level allow the resources in the community to be more responsive to their needs. Asking women what they need and what they want was a key component of the participants’ descriptions of their work. Mina had some previous experience of working in women’s organizations prior to coming to Canada, and decided to embark on building a network or organization in the years after she arrived. She did some prior research, then reached out to the community to receive feedback:

So then I did an announcement through the EAL classes and I was amazed by how many women responded. The first meeting we did at the University of Winnipeg, we had around sixty or sixty-five people.

We talked about what’s important for us. What’s important for our community. What’s important for our children. How we can support each other,



and how we can be a healthy community. Focus on building a healthy community. And where do we start?

The questions that we asked, you could see through the body language, even if they're not very expressive, there's a dire need of forming something. A place of support.

So we stuck together, and there was a willingness that yes, we can do. I didn't feel that I was alone. There was a group of people wanting to do this.

By then, some of the challenges of the government, or faced by the community was humongous. There was a lot of challenges. So we did a needs assessment of every single issue we could think of, from settlement challenges, housing, single moms struggling with parenting, struggling with leaving their families behind, gangs, all sorts of things. (Mina)

The desire for an organization existed in the community prior to Mina gathering people together. This is quite clear from the number of people who attended the first meeting.

However, it took someone in the community with the determination to make a change to get people motivated.

These initial assessments were followed up by checking in with the group members over time to see what new issues or topics should be discussed in the group. Mina explains:

One of the workshops we do is we ask the women what they need. Then, we have an education session about it. One of the women says, "We have to talk about arranged marriages." Then, when one or two women talk about it, they feel empowered to say that to another group and they're not ashamed of it. It feels normal. (Mina)

Responding to the needs of the community as identified by the women themselves allows groups to challenge and change practices and norms by opening up space for people talk about these issues.

### **Structural Constraints**

While the benefits of grassroots organizing and activism are evident, these organizations exist within the same structural confines that limit the potential of

individual newcomer women. Many of the participants mentioned that they struggle to have enough funding for their activities and organizations. Natasha volunteers her time to the organization that she works with and she explains the organization and herself both struggle with the lack of sufficient funding for her program:

First of all, we decide on what programming that can be done. We have very limited funding. [...] As a board, we have to see how best to use those funds, to do as much as we can with the funding.

Because we don't have funding for Executive Director, somebody who would be applying, writing grants and proposals, applying for money, I end up doing that kind of stuff. And I'm not trained in that area. It's not easy. It's a lot of work for me. [...]

I like to hope that this organization will be able to carry on for a while. For a long time. The reason why I say that is the funding.

There is only so much volunteering you can do with people if you don't have money. We have very, very limited funding.

I have paid staff, I need full-time staff. They're half-time because the funding is not enough. So you do need to have funding to be able to offer programs to do things on a bigger scale. My goal is to be able to broaden our programs. The only way we can broaden our programs is by more funding. (Natasha)

The determination exhibited by Natasha and the other participants to overcome these various structural constraints, such as lack of funding, to pursue social change is quite remarkable. As everyday peacemakers who do not have access to big budgets, many of these women must devote a lot of time to applying for funding, and for developing their groups and organizations with the resources at hand.

Salimah and Grace also find themselves restricted by a lack of funding. They explain that the women in their groups have identified activities that they would like to initiate, however, they are bound by financial barriers. Individual newcomer women have difficulty paying out of pocket for services, and their groups may not have access to sufficient or reliable funding:

They asked me for something to do in the winter. So one of them they said, "We need some exercise. At home we cannot, we need encouragement, some people.

And out of the home is the best.” So we give them this opportunity. It’s successful. But we’re still looking for money for that. And our women they have a limitation in their budget, so they cannot pay. (Salimah)

As the women gathering in these groups face significant financial pressures at home, they cannot afford to pay fees for ‘leisure’ activities, no matter the benefit they may derive from the gathering. Grace also mentioned this issue in her interview stating that the women require funding in order to secure a space for the women to gather and talk together:

These women are opening up in churches. They open up with people who can build their trust. They will be afraid to open up to a nurse, to a social worker, but they will open up there.

There are people who come from the same background. People who went through the same struggle. We do all of those activities on our own.

We don’t need a big amount of money, just \$10,000 only. Just to keep those women coming together around a meal to shout, and talk, and share experiences. Share challenges. (Grace)

The work these women do is important and without the support of the community at large, the individual volunteers will not have the ability to reach out to people who need assistance.

The women involved in this study are operating at the grassroots level, organizing and facilitating community-building activities with women in their neighborhoods and their communities. Some of the participants have initiated projects while the activities of others are located within existing organizations. Either way, the participants have placed emphasis on promoting a sense of equality in their groups, where they share leadership and plan activities based on the stated needs and desires of newcomer women. These groups are limited in their ability to support women and plan activities based on financial constraints and a lack of reliable funding.

**Economic Development:  
“Just need that little window of opportunity.”**

Many of the community activities described by the participants focused on aspects of economic development and improving newcomer women’s economic independence. The participants are involved in a significant amount of advocacy on behalf of newcomer women, which helps them navigate the system and become confident and independent. Newcomer women build and hone their skills through workshops and training, while some groups participate in projects like sewing and catering that directly contribute to the women’s income. Some interview participants noted that they have entrepreneurial visions for the future of developing cooperatives or businesses with women in the community that are based on skills and experience that women already have. These projects empower women both economically and socially, and help develop social bonds in the community.

Elaheh Rostami-Povey (2007b) describes activities such as sewing and knitting as being “survival strategies” that respond to the structural constraints that women experience, while enabling women to exercise their agency, build social capital, and support their empowerment (28-30). Anna indicates that the activities of community building projects do not necessarily have to be complex, but they must offer the opportunity for people to learn and to gain confidence:

The learning that I’ve had, the one that I mentioned a while ago, every one is willing to grow. Everyone is willing to share. Everyone is willing to be productive and be out there. But just need that little, little window of opportunity for them and everything will follow. So, I wanted to be that support. (Anna)

Some of these “windows of opportunity” may be in the form of survival strategies that allow women to cope with conflict and change. The survival strategies described by

Rostami-Povey (2007b) were situated in Afghanistan during a time of violent conflict; however, the concept of women's survival strategies remains useful in disparate contexts where women face significant barriers to well-being, such as structural violence.

Rostami-Povey's (2007b) concept of survival strategies is reflected in Van der Veen's (2003) discussion of the concept of "survival education" as a form of community building among economically disadvantaged communities (592). These "non-formal" training opportunities can take the form of job-preparedness training, literacy training, and some leisure education, all of which can be opportunities to build relationships between group members (Ibid., 592-3). While neither of these theorists posits that survival-type community activities necessarily emancipate women from the oppressions they face, they do argue that they can play an important role in empowering residents and building social capital in marginalized communities (Van der Veen 2003, 593; Rostami-Povey 2007b, 29). The various activities, particularly the economic and social development-oriented activities, that the study participants described appear to mirror in some ways, these forms of survival strategies. These activities help fill gaps that exist, such as economic insecurity and isolation, and create a foundation for wider social change and empowerment.

### **Training and Advocacy**

Among the most common activities that the participants engage in are training and advocacy work. After arriving in Canada, the first few weeks and months can be a blur while newcomers are adjusting to a new culture and way of life. The women I spoke with often played a role of reiterating information provided by other sources and supporting

newcomer women making this transition by helping them get settled and navigate the institutions and systems that they now have to engage with:

A lot of the time they don't speak English, or they don't have a very good command of English, so then we have interpreters here that would go with them and help them. We have a staff who would take them to the doctor, act as translator. Staff that would go with them on any dentist visit, open a bank account, go to the bank. Explain how the system works, the medical system, the education system. Just teach them about life generally here, because it's extremely different. We have English classes where we kind of supplement the EAL classes offered by the government. (Natasha)

These basic life skills are necessary for newcomers to get footing in their new setting and to begin the process of becoming settled. Having access to this support can also break-down some of the fear and isolation experienced by newcomers.

Other forms of advocacy include providing the space for women to speak about their experiences, and to build their social network. Marina describes how her organization provides therapeutic counseling, various life-skills and employment training programs, along with conversation circles that are intended to provide newcomer women with the information and preparation to become settled in Canada, and gain stable employment:

I do provide cross-cultural counseling to the women here at [our organization]. Advocacy, educational groups and workshops. Our goal is to provide them with practical tools that they can use in their everyday life. [...] Today we had a conversation café, where they were talking about communication skills. How to improve your interpersonal skills, so that you excel in the life you're living. Through the therapeutic counseling, they get more support emotionally, while at the same time getting tools they can use. (Marina)

Conversation circles and private counseling can help women improve their English language skills, which is a significant barrier for employment, and have the opportunity to talk about their lives with other women who have gone through similar experiences.

Anna explains that after going through challenges involved in immigrating to Canada and navigating the system, the members of her organization are able to take the knowledge gained from their personal experiences to help other women who are just beginning. Simply knowing how to navigate the social milieu is very important for newcomers who have recently arrived, and being able to rely on the members of their community is a great benefit:

And now this group, our group, has been empowered and has the knowledge of where to direct persons. We don't [provide the services], but we refer them to the right person so that they get the right services. (Anna)

These forms of basic assistance required in the immediate months after arrival can help confront some of the isolation that women experience as they make relationships with women involved in these organizations. Developing life-skills and English language abilities are also important for reducing the level of fear experienced by newcomer women that was identified by the study participants.

### **Building and Honing Skills**

Some of the participants identified specific income-generating activities that they organized or encouraged among women who attend their groups or organizations. For the most part, these activities reflected work that is traditionally associated with women such as sewing and cooking. Participants Selina, Natasha, and Salimah have formal sewing programs for newcomer women that help women learn to sew or practice their skills, generate income, and build relationships with other newcomer women:

I hired a coordinator and we started with the sewing club before we started with the resource center. So I had one lady that I knew back in Africa that was sewing from the time that we were in school. This was in the 60's, 70's.

So when I saw her, she came here as a refugee, I asked her, "Do you still sew?"

She said, “Yes.”

And I said, “Why don’t you come here to my office, and you can start teaching women who stay at home how to sew.” She sews without pattern.

So she said, “Oh yes.”

I started with five women and it grew to ten and just went haywire. Everyone wanted to come to my office. [...]

The isolation is being handled in a minimum way now. Because they come out, they meet their friends in the sewing room, or in any of the topics we are talking about. So they are helping each other. We have a child minding place that are provided for those programs. So all the kids will come and be together. They have fun, play games do those things, together. So those are ways of minimizing the isolation. (Selina)

By taking these skills that the women in the community already share or have an interest in, Selina is able to provide an incentive for women to gather at her organization, and build communal ties. They are not restricted by their childcare responsibilities, and can meet among other women to build their skills, and talk about issues that are important to them.

Natasha and Salimah discuss the economic incentive provided by these gatherings.

Responding to the economic challenges faced by many newcomer women in terms of finding employment, Natasha and Salimah work with women to improve their sewing skills so they can find contractual work and add to their income:

We have a sewing program where those who are a little bit better in English and have some skills can come in and practice their sewing, and learn how to sew. We try to get jobs for them so they can get a little bit more income. [...] We’ve sewn conference bags. We’ve sewn aprons. Lots of things.

That’s what we do because most of them come here with no skills, not much education, not much English. So their chances of going out there and getting a job is not easy. So here we try to offer them something they can feel good about and make a little extra money. (Natasha)

Salimah comments that supporting women in learning and practicing this skill is helpful for those who need to make some money, but are unable to take jobs outside of their homes due to childcare responsibilities:



So we do that and we try to sell those stuff, and give the revenue to the women. So we give them opportunity to learn a new skill. Especially if she's a mom, she cannot move everywhere. She could have work inside her house, she could do something for her children or another woman. (Salimah)

These programs offer practical support to women who face employment and childcare issues, while contributing to women's pride in themselves and their abilities.

Common to this approach is the respect and acknowledgement of newcomer women's skills by the organizers of these programs. Delia does not have an official sewing program, but she likewise encourages the newcomer women she meets with to utilize the skills that they have to improve their economic independence, even if they are constrained by their responsibilities in the home:

I'm giving them ideas. That's what I want to project. Giving them ideas. For example, this lady she has nine children in Canada, so she just stays home most of the time. I have ten brothers and sisters so I'm used to that. [...] And the only person who is working is your husband. The child tax credit, but it will soon be over.

But she says she knows how to sew, and she's been sewing at home for her children's clothes. And I said something to her because she relies on social assistance. And I said, "Maybe you could bring that into more of a livelihood. Like accepting repairs for pants for \$5, because at the mall you have to pay \$7. So ok, get \$4 for you. In that Manitoba Housing suite there is more than ninety of them. Pretty sure there are people who will access your [business]." And she said she never thought of that. (Delia)

While this woman may face gendered demands such as the responsibility for childrearing, she may be able to access some independence and empowerment by using the skills that she has to make her own income.

Mina has a similar project, though the women in her group are honing their cooking skills. This project is multifaceted in that women improve their cooking skills, receive specific job training, and build relationships. The project is also intended to

generate income for the women. One initiative the group embarked on was producing a cookbook of their own traditional recipes:

Then we came up with the cookbook. The cookbook was one of the major projects that we did. It took close to three and a half years. [...] We did it so we could fund the organization, and so we could get some funding to come and open a restaurant.

The cookbook involved the women working together. They would work until eleven or twelve in the morning. A Canadian communication teacher would help us. I would write the recipe in Dari, then we had Uzbek in our group, then translate it into basic English. Then polish it a little bit. Then pass it to the teacher so they would know what that means.

It was a multi-objective to learn. Some of the women can't say what the ingredients are but even if they can't say it they have a book to show. So we did some selling. We sold around 4000 or 4500 from our organization. The money's there. We're hoping to sell out. Then we looked at how the women can do something that is good about themselves. And at the same time make some money, and market their own food, and polish their skills. (Mina)

Members of the group have also been supported in applying for, and receiving their Food Handling Certificate, an important requirement for working in commercial kitchens, and have worked some catering jobs as well. The knowledge and the skills that the women already have are being valued and strengthened through this initiative. Women can feel pride in their abilities and accomplishments while improving their economic security, and building friendships with other women. A long-term goal for the women in her group is to open their own restaurant.

### **Entrepreneurial Visions for the Future**

Delia also mentioned a number of long-term goals and initiatives she would like to pursue with the women in her community. She told me that her future goals include supporting newcomer women in developing cooperatives that acknowledge and utilize the skills that the women come with so they can feel empowered, both economically and

socially. She argues that cooperatives are important for supporting women in becoming economically independent, while serving their own needs at the same time:

That's the kind of daycare that I would want to do in the future. Women being employed, they can bring their own kids at the daycare. They can look after their own children for eight hours. And aside from that, they can do childcare with other women. Instead of just staying at home. That's the co-op that they have to do a membership, but it's them that will utilize the service. Whatever hours they can share, that's how much you earn. (Delia)

This grassroots approach is very important to Delia, as she would like to support newcomer women in becoming independent, using their own skills, and responding to their own needs.

To achieve this goal, Delia supports the women in developing their own businesses and creating their own income based on the knowledge and skills that newcomer women have. While Delia does not see relying on childcare and cleaning jobs to be ideal, building their own businesses and entrepreneurial spirit responds to some of the needs of women at the grassroots:

If they want to do baby-sitting, I said to them, "Why don't we put up a daycare program?" Things like that. It's more professional that way. There's the training, we have to put up a proposal. Other aspects that you can maximize their strengths.

Because I don't like it. It's really upsetting that these are the kind of work that women are bound to do. But, I do not want to waste my brain just by thinking of that. So with that, they can benefit. I'm not a superwoman, but what I can do is a lot of networking in terms of helping with these problems. These are systemic problems. One person can make a difference. I try to make it one day at a time, that's how I try to assist them.

Maximize – you have to start with their own strength, because they have no confidence whatsoever. Same with me, I had been working in my own country for ten years in a telecommunications company, but when I come here I was looking for a baby-sitting job. *[laughs]* And cleaning, mostly. I cleaned houses, different houses.

I see newcomer women doing the same kind of job. I know that we take the same buses in this plush neighborhood. So it's more on the survival mechanisms, survival methods. (Delia)

She notes that it is difficult to make significant changes to the system, but on a small-scale you can make a difference in people's lives by utilizing the skills and abilities of people in your community to support each other.

Communities need to recognize the skills of their members, even those that are not valued monetarily on the labour market or are often overlooked (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 6), and create projects that utilize these skills and that women can participate inside, or outside of their homes. This helps women become less economically dependent on their spouses, or on social assistance, while also providing them with an outlet to the public sphere, and hopefully an opportunity to participate socially in their community. This is at the heart of a grassroots approach. Enhancing the survival skills of newcomer women, such as sewing, cooking, cleaning, and childminding are the kinds of coping mechanisms used by these everyday peacemakers to assist women in responding to the structural barriers they experience daily in Canada.

**Talking and Storytelling:  
“The power I’ve learned since being here is speaking out.”**

Some of the community activities led by the study participants, such as conversation circles, were explicitly geared toward providing a space for women to gather and talk. However, many participants stated that other activities, such as arts and crafts, cooking, and various training sessions, operated as an incentive to get people to gather, and open space for people to talk and share stories and experiences. By improving women's confidence and comfort in speaking, the organizers and facilitators of these programs challenge the silence and isolation that newcomer women experience. Senehi (2011) states that storytelling can raise a group's consciousness about issues by

“desilencing [their] experience,” and it “empowers people to address previously ‘latent’ problems and conflicts” (204). Gathering people together so they can tell their stories, talk freely about their experiences of trauma and experiences of success, allows communities to develop creative solutions to problems that they face.

### **Creating Safe Spaces**

In their groups the study participants try to create spaces that are safe and inclusive so women feel respected and supported, and are able to challenge the culture of silence that is prevalent among some newcomer communities. Mina notes that the sense of safety and trust is important for women to feel comfortable opening up:

It’s a safe environment, women can come share, talk, but we don’t have any counsel, or emotional counsel. We support each other. We want to see a sense of connectedness, respect, and sisterhood amongst ourselves. And the fact that we are all unique, we are all women. So everybody’s safe. So that’s the criteria that we have. (Mina)

As noted by some of the participants, social work and professional counseling are not always accepted in some newcomer communities. Having the opportunity to share experiences and concerns in a safe space among other newcomer women may offer an alternative.

Sharing concerns and experiences is also helpful in addressing practical issues that women face that they may be uncomfortable speaking with men or other family members about. Astrida emphasizes the importance of women being free to speak about their experiences and the issues that are affecting them, including those related to health concerns:

We talk about our lives. As I told you, I want the women to speak out what they feel. Some women they know how to do something. You know in our body we have some problems, like sicknesses. And the women can know how to help their

body to take it out of them, like how to go see the doctor. The time we sit together, I say “Ok, now ladies this is your time to share whatever you feel.” And that’s the things that can help us. What you have in your heart, please speak out so that we can learn from you. (Astrida)

These sessions allow women to talk about everyday matters that affect their lives such as health or reproductive concerns. For example, Astrida’s group had just completed an information session about reproductive health issues at the time of our interview. This session was organized based on the feedback and concerns of the women in the group.

Kyi also helps organize a newcomer women’s support group that is intended to be a space for women to talk, build relationships, and improve their English language skills when they’re unable to attend regular English classes. These groups reach out to women who may otherwise become isolated:

We provide information and do a lot of referral. We try to do activities. Every two weeks we have a women’s support circle. So all women in this area, or clients we work with, they come and participate.

We talk about what our issues, our concerns. Sometimes we bring guest speakers. We do a cooking class together. We do have conversations that are better for people who have many kids, have to bring them to school, have to pick them up and don’t have time to go to school. So at least they can come here to participate once a week. (Kyi)

The women have an opportunity to learn from each other and from the facilitators and guest speakers, while improving their English language skills.

### **Creating Spaces for Voice**

At the heart of these efforts to empower women through access to counseling and discussion groups is the need for women to have confidence in their voices, and in themselves. A culture of silence and the reality of isolation can disempower women in many aspects of their lives. In order to be able to exercise their agency women need to be able to express themselves and speak with confidence. Astrida spoke about how she tries

to have the women in her group feel comfortable openly expressing their emotions and their feelings of sadness, anger, and joy:

In the summer I like to take them to the park. Somewhere we can sit alone, see everything, and we can talk and shout. I say, “Cry whatever you want! Do it! We are strangers here. These people, they don’t know what we’re doing. Maybe they think this is how we sing. However you want.” We cry together. Cry, cry. That way she can talk whatever she wants. (Astrida)

These women are encouraged to be free enough to speak out, to cry out, and to express themselves publicly. To build a foundation of peace and to resist oppression, women need to be able to speak out about their challenges. Finding solace in their group and the ability to name their oppressions and the violence they face can be the beginning of change.

Gathering together and sharing their thoughts over cooking, sewing, or crafts can provide a moment of peace for women experiencing structural violence and can help foster a collective identity. By doing so, newcomer women may be better equipped to name their oppressions and to find strength in the group to resist these negative influences:

I’ve learned to be more patient. I am a patient kind of person, but I’ve learned to be more patient. To listen more. And speak out when I see things are really not the right thing. I come from a culture of not speaking, not speaking out even when you see things are going wrong. I come from that silence kind of background. But I’ve learned that in this part of the world it’s good to speak out. That’s the power that I’ve learned since being here, is speaking out. (Selina)

As Selina states, this is, indeed, the empowering experience of these activities: the ability and confidence to speak out against oppression and violence. These acts of speaking out in defiance may manifest themselves in collective actions, or individually as women challenge the individualized acts of violence in their lives.

## Storytelling for Change

While many of the participants had activities to encourage women to have confidence in their voices, Delia specifically spoke about the importance of gathering the stories of newcomer and migrant women. Women are encouraged to speak about their experiences and through various artistic mediums, such as creative writing and documentary filmmaking, their stories can be recorded and passed on to other women. She discusses the possibility of women attending a writing workshop to improve their English language skills and to create relationships with other women while having an opportunity to tell their life story:

[If] they said they want to write a book, for example, I know a lot of them know how to write. So, there's this creative writing [class] that doesn't ask for a [English language] benchmark level. It's a part of the workshop. It's a group of women having networking and they're being empowered. So, writing skills, but you talk about whatever.

It's about gathering their stories. It's informal. [...] It's also about the sense of belonging and ownership of the group. I want them to feel more comfortable in talking and that's how you start gathering stories from the people. (Delia)

Sharing these stories is a method for fostering a collective identity among newcomer women who come from disparate backgrounds. It is also a method for raising consciousness about the shared challenges and struggles experienced by newcomer women.

Sharing stories is a way to connect experiences across difference and promote mutual learning between women like Delia who immigrated to Canada many years ago and women who have recently arrived. Delia discusses how working in the community has broadened her mind about women's experiences and ways of being:

The question is about the things that I learned? You learn from them as well. Even if you're a graduate of this and that profession, there are so many things that you learn from your everyday life that you don't learn from school. School is a good



foundation, but when you come out and speak to different women, it's opened my mind.

It's more broader because they share their stories with you. Learn, more on their cultural upbringing. Even in my own community [...] there are more than 400 dialects and languages. So even you come from your own background, you cannot memorize, you don't know everything. I came from this background – a big province, it's in the plain – but if you go to a higher uplands or mountain area, they have a different way of expressing themselves as women. How much more if I work with different backgrounds, globally? There is always something unique to tell, to say, to learn from them. (Delia)

Storytelling is very important to Delia and she sees this as a central aspect of empowerment. Women must have the confidence to speak, and community members need to be open to learning from each other.

Delia also volunteers with an activist group that has put on a documentary film night about migrant women. By inviting other newcomer women to attend the screening, she hopes to raise the women's consciousness about the prevalence of the issues that migrant women face, and encourage them to, in turn, share their own stories:

That's mostly women's stories. I want them to get involved. Raise their awareness of what's happening. I may not be able to detail whatever their stories are, but these are good examples because these are documentary films. And that will connect to the similarity of our stories. [...]

Maybe in the future they can make a story of their life and be able to advocate to other people who have a similar situation. It's the kind of capacity building we would want to achieve. [...] Because these are immigrants, these are immigrant women. After this – it's not the actors playing in that documentary film – these are real stories. Some of them will be able to go to the film showing and relate their stories and the courage of telling your story. It becomes a conversation. (Delia)

The dual goals of raising women's consciousness about the systemic nature of the challenges and oppressions that they face, along with strengthening their confidence in speaking about their experiences both serve to promote empowerment and social change. Through this work Delia assists in building a foundation of empowerment among women in her community that can be a starting point for further action.

## Collective Problem-Solving

When women feel empowered to speak freely about their lives and experiences they are able to identify and name problems that have been previously hidden or latent. Selina gathered newcomer and refugee women in her organization and they spoke together about issues they were facing. It was in this conversation that they discovered the degree of domestic violence that existed in the community and determined that they needed to develop a support group to deal with the repercussions of violence in women's daily lives:

The [support group] emerged from just conversation we were having, around ten of us. The women were facing abuse, physical abuse, and they couldn't talk about it. [...] It was just silent. And it was going on for so many times, that the women just couldn't say anything.

So I did a workshop on abuse, different kinds of abuse. So that's why the women started opening up. So we had another circle, just talking, and we found out – I would say that that room had about nineteen people – and about seven of those women were facing abuse at that time. There were another four that had gone through abuse previously.

So we said, "Ok it's no good to be silent," because you have the negative aspect of it and the positive aspect. If you don't talk about it you are not going to find solutions and it's going to continue.

So that's how we decided on the [support group]. With my background, social work, I was able to give them counseling. We had a very good group of about twenty-five women that would talk constantly in the [support group]. (Selina)

Being able to name the challenges, abuses, and oppressions that women experience in their day-to-day lives allows them to confront these challenges, break down isolation and silence, and find collective strength to seek creative solutions.

Talking and storytelling provide a space for women to identify shared problems existing in the community along with potential methods to respond to these issues. Selina and the women in her group identified domestic violence as an issue and created a support group as a response. The group that meets with Grace also engage in collective

problem solving when they gather over food and discuss challenges and potential opportunities for job training and employment:

When we came in 2007 there was a lot of women in social activities. And they were told to go back to school. [...] There were many courses that refugees could take at the College de Saint Boniface.

So in our meetings, that's how we began. We will sit and eat, then come up with a document on different courses.

Then, "Ok. What can you do?"

"Oh, I don't have time with my age to go to university, I'll go and get my healthcare aid."

"Ok, so what do you need to do to take healthcare aid?"

"Ok, well if you're going to take it in French, you need to increase your [English language] benchmark so you can get a job. What are you going to do?"

"Don't take it in the morning. In the morning you will take English and take healthcare aid in the evening."

That's how we talk. We were really planning together. Without anybody telling us, "you need to do this." (Grace)

Rather than taking their cues from 'experts' the women in Grace's community gather to problem-solve and provide each other with guidance and support. They are able to take ownership and pride over their process and the decisions they come to.

Many of the conversations described by the participants revolved around dealing with the pressing issues that newcomer women face in their day-to-day lives. While Anna discusses these issues with the members of her group, she also hopes that she can open a dialogue with the women and families in her community about the long-term goals and aspirations of the community as a collective:

So we wanted to have that yoga for them to start thinking about mindfulness, and that self-care is important. Then moving towards conversation of, "What do we have here? Why did we come here? What's the purpose of why we're here? When we're here, are we really living with what we wanted? Or are we missing the things that we really value because of the big changes that's in here?"

Yoga has a big component of the conversation for the mental health, then healthy snack together. (Anna)

Anna expressed concern throughout her interview about the culture of her community shifting away from a communal or collective orientation to a more individualistic worldview. She hopes that she can open a space for newcomer women to discuss this issue, and contemplate what well-being means to them in the context of Canada.

Creating these safe spaces for women to gather and break down the isolation and silence that they may experience in their day-to-day lives is essential for the promotion of empowerment. Recognizing that while individual experiences are unique, they may follow a pattern that points to structural barriers to well-being. Raising consciousness about shared challenges through talking and storytelling is the first step toward social change. Part of the importance of having these opportunities to connect is for women to find their own solutions to these challenges that are responsive to their lived realities. These quiet, subtle acts of resistance may have powerful reverberations in their lives, in their families, and in their communities.

**Constrained Empowerment and Sites of Resistance:  
“You empower them without them knowing it.”**

Sewing circles, cooking classes, and conversation sessions do not immediately elicit a sense of radical social change or empowerment as they are activities that are traditionally associated with women’s work or leisure. The utility, and the potentially radical nature of these activities may be in the hidden spaces and subtle ways that social change and social justice are pursued by the grassroots. The empowerment of women occurs within a system in which barriers to well-being are built within structures and institutions. Women exercise agency and pursue empowerment in variable ways that respond to their needs, without necessarily presenting a significant challenge to the

systems that oppress them. Everyday peacemakers, such as the women in this study, use the tools at their disposal to foster social change in ways that respond to their everyday needs.

The newcomer women in this study pursue empowerment while being constrained by multiple challenges and barriers. They utilize hidden sites of resistance such as sewing and cooking classes to build a foundation for positive social change in their communities. The participants provide incentives to the women in their communities to gather in innocuous, safe spaces, and collaborate on building their social networks and creating change. The characterization of ‘constrained empowerment’ is not meant to denigrate their work or contributions, but to acknowledge that the participants do this work within the constraint of systemic and structural barriers to well-being. The spaces they create allow newcomer to exercise their agency, participate in community life, and navigate and negotiate the changes and challenges they face in terms of identity, culture, gender, and economics.

### **Providing Incentives for Engagement**

While women’s empowerment was an explicit goal of many of the participants I spoke with, some insinuated that this goal is somewhat hidden in terms of communication with members of their communities. People can be distrustful of feminist inspired language including terms such as ‘women’s empowerment.’ Mina experiences this, as some members of the community are suspicious of what this group of women is up to:

People come and see what’s going on. That’s another challenge. Some people might think we might do something – women empowerment. I always say, “Come and check the reality of what’s here. What we teach.” Because some people might

say it's not a good place to go, a woman's group. A woman's group in any society will have its own challenge. So I say, "Come and test the water." And mostly I think they come and think it's ok. (Mina)

After attending the group, critical members of the community may find that it doesn't seem so radical – a group of women gathering over sewing, cooking, or talking. As Delia states, "you empower them without them knowing it," by providing space for women to experience new roles and opportunities, and speak amongst each other about their shared challenges, goals, and successes.

Part of the strategy in getting women to gather and create this new social space is by providing some kind of incentive or activity that speaks to the everyday needs of women in the community. Anna organizes workshops for women and their families.

While she hopes that women benefit from the information provided in the workshop, she notes that these gatherings are more meaningful than merely transmitting information:

This person, she saw the poster in her school, and then she says that when she came here her life is so dark. She's at home with three children and her husband is working, so she's by herself.

But then, when she started coming out to that group, she said then that, "I've seen light." That's the term that she used, "I've seen light. Because it started my connection, even if that program doesn't cover everything." But in there she met some people that she connected with, and has prompted her, or directed her to other resources.

She isn't employed right now because she has three children, but for her she's active in her community. For her, she became empowered and she's connected with people. And for her, she's happy. (Anna)

This woman's life and identity haven't completely changed; she is still primarily responsible for caring for her children while her husband works. At the same time, she is no longer isolated and is able to have meaningful interactions and contributions with her community.

I asked Anna what she thought precipitated the positive change this woman's life. Was the change related to access to information from the workshops, or building relationships with members of her community:

I think based on what she said, it's more of the connection first. [...] When she came here for information about parenting, of course that prompted her to come. Because of that interest she learned many things. But the biggest thing for her is that connection. And that connection rooted, or scattered, or branched out for different, more information. [...]

So then she finished that and she was referred to a certain organization to become part of the advisory committee. And now she's relating or sharing what she experienced with the programming in that community. (Anna)

The woman in this example came for parenting skills and left the group with social contacts, friends, and opened up opportunities for her to build her self-esteem and provide meaningful contributions to her community. Barriers to well-being remain significant in her life as she continues to rely on her husband's income, but she is empowered in the sense that she has the confidence in herself to speak out and contribute her knowledge and skills to the community.

### **Innocuous Spaces for Positive Social Change**

Gathering in these safe spaces allows women to network and talk, while building skills that they can apply in their everyday lives. The women in Grace's group gather around food, and talk and discuss issues among other women:

So when we meet, "Where do we meet? Where are we at? Where are we willing to go?" Then we come up with many problems.

"Oh, we need to talk about *this*." Most of the time we do those conversations around the food. We bring this, I bring cassava leaves, you bring rice, and if someone can't cook, they bring juice. This is how we do it. Every time it's like a big party. (Grace)

Many of the women in the group may be facing challenges to their survival: being separated from their children, having little income or ability to pay their bills, or dealing

with significant trauma. Despite this, the act of gathering over food and talking can provide at least a moment of peace. And in this space women can discuss big picture ideas like where they want to see their community and how they can confront these challenges.

Delia meets with women to practice and learn arts and crafts. She insists that these gatherings serve more than practicing and transmitting skills, but that they have the potential to be game-changing as they offer the opportunity to raise awareness about their shared challenges and their collective strength. Delia explains:

I try to – you know the consciousness I try to put in their minds – it’s more of raising consciousness politically and socially. [...]

Crafts, you can pass it generation to generation. But what do they get out of that? The level of consciousness – I want to raise it in a different way. It’s not only about meeting at home. (Delia)

People gather together to do crafts, to cook, to sew, and to eat, and it is in these innocuous spaces that conversation can lead to social change.

The goals of empowerment and social change do not have to be explicitly connected with a political agenda, but can be translated into the lives of women in a way that is more meaningful to them. Sally Engle Merry (2006) posits that grassroots women’s organizations around the world translate human rights and women’s rights into meaningful concepts for local people through appropriation and translation (219).

Women at the grassroots do not need to adopt a feminist identity or consciousness in order to assert their rights or challenge systemic barriers to well-being (Ibid., 215).

Opening space for women to gather and speak, and ‘free themselves,’ while gaining valuable skills training is at the foundation of women’s empowerment and social change.



While continuing to be constrained by wider structural forces such as patriarchy, racism, and economic marginalization, the women in this study create hidden sites of resistance that foster empowerment among newcomer women. These groups allow women to navigate the changing social context, as well as their changing identities and gender expectations, in consultation and collaboration with other women navigating the same processes. Providing space for women to gain confidence to speak and to tell the stories of their experiences supports them in developing agency and the ability to come up with creative, grassroots solutions to the challenges they experience. These methods of coping respond to the lived realities of the women and are not imposed, but are created and constructed by newcomer women.

**Conclusion:**  
**Creating Space for Connection, Friendship, and Positive Social Change**

This chapter describes the actions of the participants as everyday peacemakers in their communities. It begins by discussing the meaning of community to the participants, and is followed by descriptions of their community building activities. The women interviewed in this study engage in grassroots community-building that is intended to not only support the empowerment of individual women, but to strengthen their communities and root these communities in the values of social justice – fairness, support, and belonging. Through grassroots community-building the participants show respect for the women in their communities and create projects and activities that respond to the needs and desires of the collective.

Through various strategies involving economic and social development, the women in this study promote positive social change among other newcomer women. These

strategies involve helping newcomer women build new skills, while also recognizing the skills that they bring with them and helping them hone and market these abilities through income-generating activities. Some participants are involved in sewing or cooking projects, while others are helping newcomer women think of ways to use their abilities to create independent businesses. Other strategies focus on social development through talking and storytelling. Embedded within various activities are the creation of spaces where women can gather, talk, and share stories about their experiences. This is central to the creation of community-based empowerment and resiliency. By raising consciousness about challenges experienced collectively, women can collaborate on solutions. These solutions are based on women's abilities, knowledge, and experience, rather than being artificial solutions foisted on them by outsiders.

The chapter is concluded by a discussion of the sites of resistance employed by the study participants to support empowerment among newcomer women. Newcomer women continue to be constrained by structural forces, and struggle to meet their basic needs and provide for their families. The spaces created by these everyday peacemakers are significant because they provide a location for newcomer women to gather, build skills, and build their confidence in themselves and their voices. They also allow women to connect their struggles and identify shared challenges and barriers to well-being. Having the ability to identify the ways that they are constrained creates the foundation for further action and activism in pursuit of social justice.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Reflections and Concluding Remarks: The Contributions of Everyday Peacemakers and Constrained Empowerment**

The preceding chapters have provided an outline of both the challenges that immigrant and refugee women face, but also of the agency exhibited by these women, and the spaces that they create to foster a sense of community-based empowerment and strength. This study hopes to contribute to the knowledge base regarding gender and conflict, grassroots peacebuilding and community development, and the sites of resistance that women create to challenge hardship and structural violence. The study is guided by an interdisciplinary review of relevant literature that draws from PACS, feminist theory, anthropology, and community development theoretical approaches. The qualitative methodology of the study focuses on PACS and feminist approaches to research that are grounded in respect and the promotion of empowerment among populations whose voices are often marginalized in theory and practice.

The central finding and recurrent theme in the research involved the work of everyday peacemakers, such as the women in this study, and the ‘constrained’ empowerment that they foster in their communities. The women interviewed in the study are committed to promoting empowerment among other newcomer women by organizing and facilitating community-building activities. These activities offer women the opportunity to gather, build skills and social networks, and gain a sense of confidence in their voice and in themselves. At the same time, the women continue to be constrained by structural violence and barriers such as discrimination based on gender, race, class,

religion, and immigration status. Constrained empowerment remains a significant contribution as it creates a foundation for social change and supports individual agency.

This study set out to increase the understanding of the worldview and perceptions of immigrant and refugee women concerning their role in the community as organizers and facilitators of community activities with other newcomer women. To this end, the study explored how they saw their role and what their goals and hopes were for the women in their communities. This section will provide a brief summary of the major themes or findings of the study and will conclude with an overview of the concept of ‘constrained empowerment’ and a discussion of the participants’ role as everyday peacemakers.

### **Gender and Structural Violence**

The women interviewed in this study challenge the notion that after immigration and resettlement to Canada, newcomer women no longer face barriers to well-being or violence. These women explicitly identify numerous ways that they experience hardship and loss, and oftentimes they reveal the gendered nature of these challenges. Structural violence is based on the experience of inequality and uneven distribution of resources (Galtung 1969; Jeong 2000; Chasin 2004). Forms of structural violence identified by the participants include gender-based discrimination, racial and religious discrimination, and economic insecurity.

Silence, isolation, and economic insecurity are challenges that punctuated many of the interviews with the study participants. While some gender roles change in response to immigration and the changing cultural context, women often continue to be responsible for childcare in the home. These responsibilities combined with the fear and confusion

associated with culture shock contributes to the isolation of newcomer women. Women are unable to turn to their traditional forms of social support and guidance these webs of support have been disrupted by the changing cultural context, and physical separation from family and friends. While women may have previously gone to their neighbors or extended family for help, they may find themselves separated from these sources of support, and isolated by the prevalence of an individualistic culture among Canadians.

Hardships and loss also exist within newcomer women's homes as members of the family struggle with changing roles and cultural norms. Participants discussed tensions that occur in newcomer families between spouses, and between parents and their children. All members of the family contend with culture shock and challenges associated with immigration and these tensions can give rise to domestic violence and intergenerational conflict. As newcomer women are commonly the primary caregivers in their homes, they experience this challenge in a particular way as they are forced to adapt their parenting styles under threat of having their children removed from the home by social service agencies. These challenges in the home can lead to further depression, marginalization, and disempowerment among newcomer women, particularly when they are isolated or lacking a support system.

Compounding the difficulty faced by women in negotiating these changing identity and family dynamics is the loss of economic security related to the devaluing of women's experience and credentials. Many refugee women come to Canada without formal education or English language skills, which puts them at a significant disadvantage in the labour market. On the other hand, many of the participants reported that they had professional degrees and work experience prior to coming to Canada and they still were

unable to find jobs in their field. Some participants noted that the available employment for newcomer women often includes gendered forms of labour such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare – opportunities that are not highly remunerated in the labour market. Newcomer women are confronted with a lack of opportunity in the labour market – constraints that are related to their gender, race, religion, and immigrant status.

The inability to gain meaningful employment after arriving in Canada has a significant impact on newcomer women and their families. It contributes to culture shock and the loss of identity, and creates practical barriers to well-being in newcomer women's lives. These circumstances can lead to women taking jobs that leave them unable to support their families, and jobs where they face exploitation and abuse by unethical employers. The economic insecurity that newcomer women face is a form of structural violence as the barriers they experience result in disproportionate levels of poverty, and lack of opportunity.

While immigrant and refugee men were not a part of this study, it can be presumed that they face many of these challenges as well. However, due to the influence of patriarchal systems, women experience structural violence in a particular way (Confortini 2006, Merry 2009), and are often constrained in a gendered manner relating to their roles as wives and mothers, or more generally as women.

### **Newcomer Women's Agency and the Construction of Identity**

Despite these challenges, the participants in the study made clear that they are not merely victims of these barriers, but are active agents who pursue change and empowerment within their communities. The theoretical and methodological framework of the study intended to explore not only the challenges that women face, but to consider

the agency and strength that women possess, and the empowerment that they foster within their communities. Feminist theorists consider the ways that women face direct and structural violence and how women respond to these forms of violence to find the strength to challenge these structures (Jacoby 2005, Enloe 2010). PACS literature echoes the perspective that empowerment and social justice are at the center of conflict transformation and peace (Lederach 1995).

Many of the participants in the study described advancing women's empowerment as being an important goal and motivating factor for their work. Empowering activities were often defined as those that support women in building confidence in their voices and ability to speak out about their experiences. The women's goals for their work involved fostering a sense of independence and confidence among newcomer women who find themselves disempowered in the Canadian context. They also hope to create new bonds among community members so that, as a group, they can support each other by accessing collective strength. By constructing and supporting new social networks and bonds within the community, among newcomer women, they are able to work together to build individual resiliency, and community-based empowerment.

The women in this study are navigating a transition in their lives, and challenging and contesting aspects of both traditional norms and gender roles, and the cultural influences that they find in Canada. Sally Engle Merry (2006), an anthropologist, made the important contribution of the concept of contested culture. She explains that theorizing culture as a monolithic, static, and homogenous robs individuals and groups of their agency and denies their role in challenging and resisting oppressive aspects of cultural norms (Merry 2006, 9). Rather, she argues that culture must be understood as

internally contested by its members, and constructed within its context (Ibid.). This understanding ensures that individuals are seen as active agents, both preserving and contesting aspects of their own culture. The participants in the study are also active agents in this process of construction of new identities and norms.

The participants, as everyday peacemakers, assist the women in their communities to explore and negotiate the changes they are experiencing, while constructing new norms that reflect their needs and realities. Spitzer (2007) explains that the newcomer women in her study created “altered identities” in order to cope with the changing roles, norms, and challenges that they faced after coming to Canada (60). This concept also connects with van der Veen’s (2003) explanation of conservative and emancipatory approaches to community building. The conservative approach wishes to preserve or restore the community in response to a perceived threat, while the emancipatory approach wishes to pursue social change and challenge structures through activism (van der Veen 2003, 582-583). By creating safe spaces for women to gather and negotiate these changes together, the women interviewed for this study attempt to both restore a sense of community that has been lost or threatened due to immigration, and to pursue social change by challenging the prevalence of isolation and silence among newcomer women.

A few participants noted that they encourage the women in their groups to find positive aspects of the various cultural influences that they are exposed to in order to alter and construct new norms and narratives. Whether they are activist or more conservative in orientation, the participants endeavor to challenge oppressive structures by supporting and assisting in the empowerment of newcomer women. In this role, they are helping women navigate this transition by offering respect, support, and guidance. In the words of



Marina, newcomer women are “experts of their own lives,” and active agents in the pursuit of empowerment, and in the contestation and construction of cultural narratives.

The women in this study assist newcomer women in developing coping mechanisms to deal with structural violence and to create new meanings and norms that respond to their lived reality. While traditional support systems have been disrupted, the participants actively attempt to re-create new sources of support and community through community-building activities. These activities are rooted in the values of fairness, belonging, and support. By working at the grassroots with the newcomer women in their communities, the participants encourage positive social change in their communities.

### **Empowerment and Community Building**

The women, as everyday peacemakers, pursue empowerment through a variety of means. In describing their understanding or perspective on the concept of community, many participants noted that communities are valuable in their ability to support their members, and create a sense of belonging that breaks down feelings of isolation and fear. These women engage in forms of grassroots community-building where they create spaces for women to gather, form relationships, and benefit from economic and social development.

Taking an asset-based approach, similar to the asset-based community development model suggested by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), some of the community activities that the participants were involved in were geared toward using the skills that women already possess such as cooking, sewing, and childcare and utilizing them for the economic development of the newcomer women in the community. Social development and empowerment were also embedded in these activities as the participants describe

them as opportunities for the women to gather and talk about their experiences in a safe space. In these spaces, women are able to discuss the challenges they face, and create potential solutions or methods of adapting or coping with their struggles.

Enloe (2010) makes the point in her book, *Nimo's War, Emma's War*, that women's gendered spaces, such as beauty salons in Iraq, are often overlooked as political spaces or sites of resistance while these spaces are where women can gather in relative safety and comfort and discuss controversial issues. The contributions of 'ordinary' people are often overlooked by the academy while the methods they use, on an individual and community level, to cope with conflict (Mac Ginty, 2013) and resist oppression (Scott 1985), can have a significant impact on wider social dynamics and can build the foundation for a meaningful, sustainable peace.

The participants make use of these gendered spaces to provide an incentive for women to gather and build their pride and confidence. To confront the challenges of isolation, culture shock, and economic insecurity, the participants develop and organize activities that are intended to build the skills and knowledge of newcomer women that can be used to find employment or sources of income. These activities include advocacy and life-skills training, and more specific skills-training projects like sewing and cooking classes. Other interviewees encouraged women to use their pre-existing skills to develop cooperatives or home businesses to supplement their income and provide themselves with a level of financial independence and personal accomplishment.

These activities also served another purpose, namely, to bring women together to build social bonds and to strengthen their capacity to speak with confidence. While women gather over their cooking, sewing, or crafts they are also talking to each other and

being supported by their peers. Supporting women in developing their confidence in their voices and in themselves is essential to empowerment as it allows women to identify sources of oppression they face individually, and discover those oppressions that they experience collectively. Naming these issues and developing a level of consciousness about their shared experiences creates the opportunity for women to develop collective solutions and coping mechanisms. These gatherings also provide an opportunity for women to experience moments of peace and support as they enjoy food and conversation with women in their community.

Empowerment is not something that is found only at the individual level, but is something that can be supported and sustained by the community (Pulvirenti and Mason 2011). The women in this study create these spaces for empowering each other in their community groups and organizations where women can come and feel safe and included.

### **Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study is limited by a few factors that may be useful considerations for future research. This study does not include the voices of newcomer men, or their perceptions on changing gender roles, challenges, or opportunities for empowerment. The inclusion of women's voices in research and practice is necessary for creating positive social change and social justice. At the same time, men are also needed to make changes to gendered barriers to well-being and patriarchal structures that constrain members of all genders. A future study including the participation of immigrant and refugee women and men would be interesting and would be more holistic in scope.

Additionally, one key informant who was not interviewed for this study suggested that the study could be improved by speaking with the women who attend these activities

to determine what their role is in supporting and sustaining the leaders of the group. Speaking with these women would also help to improve the understanding of how their perspectives as recent newcomers influence the goals and activities of the group. A study including these voices may reveal what the participants take away from these groups, and how this influences their worldview in Canada.

### **Significance**

This study assists in building theory and addressing a gap in PACS literature regarding gender, structural violence, and peace. Sandole-Staroste (2011) notes that while gender analysis has been accepted as an important contribution in the PACS field, it is still tacked on, often by feminist researchers, rather being considered an integral aspect of all PACS approaches (235). By creating more scholarship concerning women's experiences and the effect of gendered power structures these barriers may be broken down so that research and practice respond to the lived realities of both women and men. The study embraces the specificities of immigrant and refugee women's experiences, rather than aiming to be overly generalizable, an approach that may erase the intersection of the participants' various identities and experiences of oppression and agency. This study endeavors to challenge the marginalization and silencing of women's voices and appreciates their knowledge and contributions to positive social change.

The findings of this study indicate the utility and contribution that interdisciplinary sources of theory such as feminism, anthropology, and community development can make to the PACS field. Post-structural feminism and intersectionality are useful for identifying both gendered sources of oppression and their socially-constructed nature (Enloe 2004, 2010; Merry 2009; Confortini 2006; Leatherman 2011). Similarly,

anthropological perspectives are used to consider the constructed and variable nature of culture and identity, rather than viewing these concepts as homogenous or immutable (Merry 2006; Griffiths 2001).

Community development theories, such as asset-based community development, reveal the ways that grassroots approaches to social change and peace can include and respond to the needs and the skills of marginalized populations (Kretzmann and McKnight 1994; Mathie and Cunningham 2003). These approaches along with the theories derived from PACS scholars such as Lederach's (1995) grassroots approach to peacebuilding; Senehi's (2011) connection between storytelling, voice, and peacebuilding; and Snyder's (2011a; 2011b) contributions on gender and peacebuilding create a holistic approach to understanding the human experiences of conflict, identity, and peace. This is significant for both theory and practice in order to create understandings of these complex concepts that respond to people's lived reality.

Finally, this study hopes to contribute to literature regarding women's experiences of structural and direct violence, along with the ways that they utilize their agency to promote social change and social justice. Echoing the sentiment of Sandole-Staroste (2011) and Enloe (2004, 2010), these perspectives need to be integrated into all approaches to understanding conflict and peacebuilding. Women experience numerous gendered challenges and oppressions, and at the same time they are active agents for change and empowerment even if they continue to be constrained by these wider forces.

The findings of this study are significant as they help integrate feminist theories such as intersectionality into the theoretical foundation of PACS. They point to the possibility of future research relating to not only the varied ways that women experience

violence, conflict, and oppression, but the varied ways that women exercise their agency and find space for peacebuilding. The women participating in this study represent everyday peacebuilders who encourage a constrained form of empowerment among the women in their communities. They foster hidden, safe spaces where women can gather, gain skills, friends, and support as they navigate the transition into a new life in Canada. Further research on constrained empowerment and everyday peacemaking will improve our knowledge of the way that women at the grassroots challenge oppression and build a foundation for peace.

### **Everyday Peacemakers and Constrained Empowerment**

When I approached this study, I was interested in learning about ‘what was really going on’ among newcomer women who gather under the guise of community building projects like cooking and sewing classes or groups. As I was using the method of snowball sampling, I wasn’t sure exactly who I would be speaking with, or what activities they would be engaged in, but I was certain that many of them would involve activities that are traditionally associated with ‘women’s work.’ Admittedly, I was concerned that while I was interested in this topic, these projects were not really about ‘empowerment’ as they are centered on spaces and activities traditionally associated with women. Were they really challenging, or overcoming oppression in these spaces? I had some apprehension about this, but decided to speak with the women to see what they had to say about the meaning of their work and their role in the community.

Looking back on the interviews and the analysis of this information, I found that the most important contribution of this study is the valuing and recognition of ‘constrained empowerment’ and the safe and hidden spaces in which it is fostered by

everyday peacemakers. Newcomer women experience an intersection of oppression from a variety of sources: gender, race, religion, class, and immigration status to name a few. The ability to gather and build social networks and rebuild community allows women to access community-based resilience. This may translate into a foundation for further community-level action and activity or may translate into individual empowerment and resiliency.

My initial concerns about the validity of this study in the context of the PACS field are indicative of the privilege I experience, based on my social location. Previously, the concept of empowerment conjured an idea of something radical that challenges the roots of oppression. This analysis ignores the day-to-day realities of many women who face structural violence and multiple oppressions. Having space to build confidence in yourself and your voice while gaining the knowledge and skills that have an immediate economic and social impact are empowering activities. They respond to the actual needs and lived realities of the newcomer women who access these resources. They are radical, or revolutionary in the sense that they have the capacity to make a significant impact on women's lives, even if their main outcome is the development of confidence, pride, and self-respect among women who may otherwise be disempowered in many aspects of their lives.

I have referred to this concept as 'constrained' empowerment in an effort to recognize and affirm that the work that is being done is important and assists newcomer women in exercising their agency, while also recognizing that women continue to face various oppressions and forms of structural violence. When I introduced the participants to the study, I explained that the intention of the research was to acknowledge the

challenges that newcomer women experience, while acknowledging and affirming the strength that exists among newcomer women. The participants spoke about their goals and hopes for the women in their communities and they also spoke at length about the losses and hardships experienced by newcomers. The work these women do is significant in that it provides space for newcomer women to create bonds and friendships that serve as a foundation for a new form of community, and a foundation for positive social change. It also remains important to acknowledge that newcomer women create these spaces in the context and constraint of structures that serve as barriers to well-being for newcomer women and their families.

Susan Chase (1995) introduced the notion of ambiguous empowerment through her study of women working as school superintendents. Their empowerment was ambiguous as the women experienced both power, due to their professional status, and gender and racial discrimination and oppression within the workplace. These women responded to their marginalization by finding individual ways to confront inequality in their professional lives (Ibid.).

I suggest that the agency and empowerment exhibited by the newcomer women I interviewed is ‘constrained,’ as opposed to ambiguous, as they face dehumanizing loss and multiple hardships and barriers to well-being. The women often continue to struggle to meet their basic needs and provide for their families. The community-building work that the study participants engage in builds a foundation for positive social change and social justice among a group of women who continue to face significant structural barriers and forms of structural violence.



It is important to value the contributions of these women in building a foundation for change in their communities, and it is essential to avoid complacency regarding social justice. These activities do not represent a significant challenge to prevailing patriarchal structures, or to forms of structural violence such as the oppression of economic insecurity. The work that these women do is still meaningful as it opens space for women to gather, form relationships, and begin constructing new identities and norms that respond to their lived reality. Scott (1985) explains that everyday forms of resistance do not necessarily directly challenge structural barriers though they provide a method for marginalized populations to respond to these barriers and slowly push for social change.

Empowerment does not always imply the emancipation from oppression, but it can include constrained forms of empowerment in situations where women are struggling for survival and the ability to meet their basic needs. Women can make use of hidden spaces to navigate cultural changes and create a level of empowerment that allows them to access and claim agency, and cope with the numerous challenges in their everyday lives. The contributions of everyday peacemakers, like the women involved in this study, create the foundation for social change and social justice, and a basis for continued action.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Questions**

1. Please describe what you do in your work with women in your community. What is your role?
2. Why do you do this work?
3. What are your goals?
4. What have you learned in doing this work?
5. What are some of the challenges that you face in doing this work? What sustains you in hard times?
6. What are some of the challenges women face in your community?
7. How do women cope with, or confront these challenges?
8. Please describe someone who has inspired you to do your work.
9. What does community mean to you?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself or the women you work with?