

## ABSTRACT

The Intersection of Social Work and Syrian Women with Refugee Status: A Transnational Matricentric Feminist Perspective.

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Social workers have a history of engagement with refugees since the inception of the profession. However, many social workers engage with clients without knowing about their refugee status, and globalization and forced displacement is causing this to be a more frequent issue at this time. The Syrian war has created the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known, and yet the United States has had a lackluster response to welcoming Syrian refugees despite a strong record of previously welcoming refugees. With the recent change in presidential administration, it is expected that Syrian refugees will soon be welcomed in this nation. As such, social workers need to be prepared to support them effectively. Within the population of Syrians with refugee status, women (particularly mothers) are most at risk; therefore, this dissertation seeks to understand more about the relationship between Syrian mothers with refugee status and the social workers who support them. To accomplish this, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted to gain insight into the dynamics between two resettled Syrian mothers, the refugee resettlement workers, and the state refugee office workers in Chapter Two.

The following chapter, Chapter Three, looks at a quantitative survey of social workers in North Carolina to understand more about their perceptions towards Syrian women with refugee status in order to help the field become more prepared for future arrivals. From there, Chapter Four presents a conceptual article which creates a model for social workers who identify as Christian to welcome Syrian women with refugee status by creating a deeper and more empathetic understanding of each other through the use of crossover texts from the Holy Bible and Holy Qur'an. Altogether, this dissertation offers recommendations for social workers to improve their work with Syrian women with refugee status from a transnational feminist perspective which stands in solidarity with Syrian women on their journey and urges social workers to critically reflect upon their own perceptions in the process.

The Intersection of Social Work and Syrian Women with Refugee Status

by

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A Dissertation

Approved by the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work

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## DEDICATION

To the mothers of Syria, who have borne the burdens of war without losing hope. May the world see your strength and welcome you with open arms – and may the social workers ease the journey along the way.

## EPIGRAPH

When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.'

1 Chronicles 16:19-22

إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا

Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.

Qur'an 94:6

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Intersection of Social Work and Syrian Women with Refugee Status: A Transnational Matricentric Feminist Perspective.

#### *Introduction*

The profession of social work has been centered around caring for and supporting those who are marginalized since its inception. In the United States (U.S.), there is a long history of social work interaction with immigrants, although the intersection of social work with refugees is relatively new simply because the designation of “refugee” is itself relatively new (Park, 2008). As a general difference, current terminology differentiates between the two in that immigrants tend to be driven towards migration by choice for economic gain, whereas refugees are forced to flee their home for their own safety. While there are other distinctions, immigrants move because of a hopeful desire to improve their lives, whereas refugees move due to fear that their lives will end if they do not (Skerry, 2019). Social work emerged as a viable profession during a time when there was a significant influx of immigrants arriving in the U.S – before there was a distinction amongst terms. As a result, many of the poor served by social workers were in fact refugees (Park, 2008).

As globalization increases, social workers in local communities are adjusting their practices to meet needs which often have international components. Events around the world can now have great impact in other nations, whether economically, socially, or otherwise. Cultures throughout the world are therefore interconnected, and these

connections are often most easily visible through following migration patterns (Lyons, 2006). This can certainly be seen through the migration of refugees.

### *History of Refugee Policy in the United States*

While the world has a long history of refugee resettlement issues, the United States does not have longstanding policies on how to cope with addressing refugee needs. Although the U.S. is a nation founded by immigrants (many of whom would currently be identified as refugees fleeing religious and physical persecution) who have settled here for hundreds of years with unrestricted access (Martin, 2017), there has been a tumultuous relationship between U.S. policy and refugees seeking assistance from the government in more recent years. Congress began limiting access of people who they believed would be a burden on the system in the 1880s, but they included a provision to allow entry to those “seeking to avoid persecution on religious or political grounds” (Zolberg, 1998).

Immigration itself was not strictly regulated until 1921, when the Emergency Quota Act limited the maximum capacity of immigrants from any one population to no more than 3% of the total citizens from that nation. This was quickly lowered in 1924 to acceptance of only 2% of a country’s total population (Congressional Digest, 2016). These limits instantly shifted the ability of certain populations to enter the country, virtually excluding Asian immigrants and creating a preference for European immigrants. There was no formal refugee legislation until WWII, when the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 allowed for 220,000 refugees fleeing Germany to enter the United States in a two-year period, but this limit was subsequently increased to 415,000 at the end of those two years (Martin, 2017). This is considered the first refugee legislation in the country due to

the distinction that refugees were fleeing persecution (as opposed to immigrants who move by choice) and set the precedent for screening and processing applicants outside of the United States before granting admission (Churgin, 1996).

Formal definitions of a refugee were created for global standards at a conference in Geneva in 1951 (Congressional Digest, 2016), and shortly afterwards the United States created the Refugee Act of 1953. This policy began to shift the ideology of refugee acceptance towards accepting people who were fleeing from Communist regimes. However, a subsequent update created the Refugee Escapee Act of 1957 which utilized the verbiage from the 1951 conference but added in the qualifiers of defining a refugee-escapee as fleeing a Communist or Middle Eastern country (Martin, 2017). During this time, refugee resettlement became heavily entwined with foreign policy interests. A new policy tool appeared around the same time; this was the concept of “parole” which was utilized when there were not enough visas to allow certain people in, but it was deemed in public interest to accept them into the country. This parole policy option puts more control of refugee admissions into the hands of the sitting President than to Congress (Zolberg, 1998) and is mostly used to extend the number of refugees allowed to enter above the quota limits (Churgin, 1996). This is how nearly 38,000 Hungarian refugees were able to enter the United States after the Hungarian Revolution, Cubans were able to escape their Communist regime, as well as many refugees from Southeast Asia and the former Soviet Union (Martin, 2017).

Further changes occurred in 1965 in refugee admissions with the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which set the limit of refugee acceptance at 6% of the total annual granted visas and created a policy preference for immigrants who wished to reunite with

family or had substantial skills to contribute to the economy (Congressional Digest, 2016). As this Act brought about formal guidelines, it also restricted the use of parole to only urgent and individual cases. Although these changes severely limited the number of refugee admissions to only 17,400 per year total, political unrest and economic sanctions in Cuba prompted mass migration around the same time (Zolberg, 1998). Despite use of the parole being limited by Congress, 370,000 Cubans were granted entrance and became permanent residence via its use by 1978. Shortly thereafter, Haitians sought refuge here as well, which prompted the government to institute a mass detention program to deter people from seeking to enter the country. However, since they were in the boundaries of the nation, the Haitians were able to utilize the U.S legal system to gain rights, which those who are outside of the country are not able to do. As a result, the government has enacted stringent border control measures to keep people from entering the country in order to prevent their access to the legal system (Churgin, 1996). Many of these measures are still in practice along the southern border of the United States today.

The Refugee Act of 1980 created a formal and permanent system for refugees to enter the United States (Martin, 2017). This legislation formally adopted the definition of a refugee from the 1951 Conference in Geneva and removed the wording about Communist countries, but the United States still demonstrated preference in accepting refugees fleeing Communism (Martin, 2017), and now granted refugees permanent resident status (Zolberg, 1998). Additionally, the Office of Refugee Resettlement was created within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and a provision was enacted to bring “home” children fathered in other countries by U.S. military men.

There would subsequently be another act in 1987 specifically related to

Amerasians fathered by military personnel which also allowed for the children's mothers and siblings to enter the United States. (Congressional Digest, 2016). The United States found that the influx of displaced persons from Central and South America to be overwhelming, but there were political interests in those regions which complicated policy matters. As a result, the Immigration Act of 1990 created a "temporary protected status" which allowed for entrance into the country with authorization for employment as well. Since that time, this provision has been utilized for several refugee populations with smaller numbers of applicants including those from Bosnia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Somalia, and more (Churgin, 1996).

While there has not been another sweeping refugee policy legislation such as the 1980 Refugee Act, there have been several policy additions which greatly impacted the refugee program. Indeed, 9/11 brought several policy changes which affected refugees, particularly those who are Muslim or Middle Eastern. The 9/11 era was not the beginning of anti-Islamic sentiments in the U.S., but rather, it was the culmination of a series of issues throughout the years which created anti-Arab views, most notably, the Six Day War in 1967, the oil embargo of 1973, the first Gulf War, and the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center. September 11 was the "turning point" for already started racist and prejudicial views against Arabs in the U.S. and policies instituted by the U.S. government following 9/11 only worsened the perception of the general public who viewed Arabs and Muslims as terrorists (Fadda-Conrey, 2011; Azam, 2018).

Under the George W. Bush administration, the Patriot Act of 2001 increased the number of people deemed ineligible to enter the country by excluding those who have affiliations with terrorism (Congressional Digest, 2016). Indeed, so-called "Islamic

terrorism” became a focus of U.S. policy as a national security threat, which has led to an unfounded fear of Muslim refugees. The Trump administration focused heavily on anti-Islamic and anti-Middle Eastern rhetoric, and executive orders have severely restricted migration. In fact, in FY 2017, President Trump reduced the number of refugee admissions from 110,000 to 50,000 and suspended the entire refugee program for 120 days (Scribner, 2017). The impact of this on the future of refugee resettlement in the U.S. is unclear. However, according to researchers and analysts, this tumultuous period has created a particularly dangerous sociopolitical climate for Arab and Muslim women, particularly because they are more visible when wearing hijab, which makes them a target for discrimination (Barkdull et al., 2011; Azam, 2018).

#### *Religious Intersection with United States Refugee Policy*

Another aspect of the U.S. refugee resettlement program besides the government policies is the creation of voluntary agencies, or volags, which are independent (often nonprofit) organizations which support and facilitate the movement and accommodation of refugees, post-resettlement. The first such agency in the U.S. predates any formal policy. It was founded in 1881 under Jewish religious principles as a response to issues with Russia to create the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). The HIAS helped to resettle many Jewish people to the Midwestern region of the United States, supported the resettlement of many Jewish refugees escaping the Nazi regime, and later worked with other ethnicities as well (Forrest, 2014). More than 2 million Jewish people emigrated to the United States by the early 1900s with their assistance, but there was no formal classification of a refugee at this time so while they are not designated as such, they would likely be called refugees under today’s standards (Zolberg, 1998).

In addition to the HIAS, there were several Christian refugee organizations established between 1930 and 1979 which initially focused on resettling those from their own denominations, but eventually they made their services available to all in need (Forrest, 2014). Catholic Relief Services emerged in 1943 and Church World Services was formed in 1946 to help respond to the refugee crisis in Europe following World War II. In many ways, congregations began to respond to these humanitarian needs as they felt their faith called them to do so. At that time, communities were responsible for covering the costs of resettling refugees into the area, and today there is still a model of public-private sponsorship which entwines the faith community with refugee resettlement (Eby, 2106). However, this did serve to segregate incoming refugee groups by geographic area based around the agencies. Between resettlement agency locations and family or cultural community ties, this effectively created pockets of refugee cultural communities throughout the United States (Forrest, 2014).

Faith based agencies have played an integral role not only in supporting refugees but also in shaping policies surrounding their reception. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faith communities pressured the U.S. government to broaden the scope of the refugee resettlement program to include a more humanitarian focus instead of concentrating on those fleeing communist regimes or who aligned with the country's political interests. This was a driving force behind the creation of the Refugee Act of 1980, which still determines the eligibility of refugee applicants today (Eby, 2011). Studies indicate that faith-based resettlement agencies primarily use their religious perspectives as the guiding framework for the *reason* behind providing services more than the content of the services themselves (Eby, 2011; Chiba, 2014; Nawyn 2006), and

indeed, there is a requirement in the cooperative agreement between these agencies and the U.S. government which strictly prohibits proselytizing (Eby, 2011). However, the wording of their mission statements and guiding frameworks may encourage unequal power dynamics in which the worker or volunteer is positioned as the “helper” and the refugee is positioned as the disempowered recipient (McKinnon, 2006).

Currently, more than half of the government funded resettlement agencies are religiously based organizations, which indicates that the majority of refugee support comes from a faith perspective. Following scripturally based directives, most position refugees into places of “other” in society: outsider, foreigner, needy, helpless, stranger. However, there is a distinct problem with this in the United States: most citizens have forgotten that they too were once immigrants or strangers in this land, and therefore fail to connect to the plight of the refugee in meaningful ways. Often, the focus is not on providing supportive assistance to the refugee but providing *salvation* for them (McKinnon, 2009). Religion is entwined with the resettlement agencies but also with the root cause of displacement as a whole, as people are often persecuted for their religious beliefs. This significantly complicates current processes, as many refugees coming into the United States are of the Muslim faith, and most resettlement agencies come from the Judeo-Christian tradition (Nawyn, 2006).

### *History of Social Work with refugees*

U.S. immigration policy tends to fluctuate between less restriction and quota options, but always with a focus on distinguishing between those who are deserving and those who are undeserving of entry in the country. Over time, this also became a distinction between immigrants and refugees. The field of social work began during a

time when there was frequent migration to this country. Although these immigrants did not have the designation of “refugee” at the time, many of those served by social workers were, in fact, refugees (Park, 2008). Many early social work activities focused around supporting these immigrants while facilitating their adaptation to the local society and encouraging their ability to thrive within their new – and often challenging - surroundings (Scales & Kelly, 2011).

Early social workers Grace and Edith Abbott defended immigrants (some refugees) against those who claimed they were causing problems in society, a negative sentiment which was often found in early social work thought. There was also the underlying thought that Nordic (Irish, German, Scandinavian) and Western European immigrants were favorable to Eastern or Southern immigrants, a theme which continues today (Park, 2008). The Settlement House Movement started by Jane Addams was, in part, founded to assist those in the working class, who were primarily immigrants from Eastern Europe. The perspectives of these early social workers greatly shaped the policies towards those seeking refuge at the time (Lissak, 1983).

Some view Addams’ stance on these immigrants (many of whom would be modern-day refugees) as advanced and egalitarian but others purport that she held an air of superiority in her work with this population. Regardless, her devotion to this new group of people in the United States was well known and she is touted as being a key figure in social work who ultimately influenced refugee reception (Lissak, 1983). Early social work often focused on creating “good” citizens through the use of classes at settlement houses and other neighborhood agencies. This focus on integrating outsiders

into U.S. society has been a hallmark of social work with refugees throughout history (Balgopol, 2000).

While Jane Addams advocated for full support of immigrants, there were others who held racist perspectives including fear that welcoming outsiders would lead to miscegenation (Lissak, 1983). During this time in the early 1900s, refugees were seen as preferable immigrants because their flight from oppression was deemed more noble than simply wanting to leave a country to escape poverty or seek better circumstances. However, this was more of an idealistic value and other early social workers were in favor of restricting immigration into the country altogether. The notion of an ideal immigrant (i.e., a refugee) was at the time unattainable which justified restrictive policies. Still, others had concerns about the ethics of policies used to determine entry. The Immigration Act of 1924, for instance, raised concerns for some as it caused the separation of families which some felt was a discriminatory practice which harmed the sanctity of the family unit (Park, 2008).

The Settlement House Movement sought to integrate not only those who were foreign-born with the dominant U.S. culture, but to adapt to society by encouraging interaction between all classes and nationalities of people in order to break down social barriers. However, this did not work for everyone and some cultures felt isolated or segregated (Lissak, 1983). Early social work focused on the needs of White refugees and ensuring conformity with dominant society. Those from Asia, Africa, and South America were often left to receive support from their own social channels. Charity workers focused on assimilation rather than integration of various cultures (Jani & Reisch, 2018). Often, this was because early social workers failed to understand the importance of each

individual cultural identity and the impact this would have on their attempts to encourage uniform acculturation (Lissak, 1983).

Regardless, Hull House became a model for assisting immigrants (and would-be refugees) with acculturating to U.S. society where they could continue to contribute their unique gifts and cultural attributes. This is a model still used today. Formal policy however changed based on the immigrant population involved at the time (Lissak, 1983). By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social workers were overwhelmed with the demands placed upon them and pushed for more government involvement in these issues (Jani & Reisch, 2018). The concept of “refugee” did not fully form in the social work consciousness until circa WWII, and after that, the current definition of refugee was not solidified until the year 2000. Prior to the Refugee Act of 1980, all refugees entered the U.S. either by Presidential or Congressional decision, or simply as immigrants (Park, 2008). After WWII, voluntary agencies (volags) often managed the needs of incoming refugees. Attitudes towards refugee reception in the social work field fluctuated depending on the status of the economy and public-private partnerships to distribute programmatic needs and funds (Jani & Reisch, 2018).

Beyond WWII, refugees became more diverse ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. At the same time, refugees also experienced greater levels of discrimination and felt less welcome in the U.S. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of refugees began to change throughout the years from more upper-class individuals to those with less educational and employment status. Despite a newer focus on melting pot ideology which allows for retention of characteristics deemed useful to society, there

continues to be a focus on assimilation into the dominant U.S. culture and a preference for those who are European in presentation (Balgopal, 2000).

Currently, social work places great importance on the mental health of refugees and providing services to support positive outcomes. This marks a change from the profession's previous focus on ensuring that the basic needs of refugees are met to providing greater more attention to social and psychological needs (Jani & Reisch, 2018). The importance of cultural competency and intercultural exchange is often provided in social work training in order to develop humility and avoid "othering" refugees (Hagues et al., 2019). However, acceptance of cultural diversity continues to be met with resistance (Balgopal, 2000).

There is still a preference in the U.S. today for refugees and asylees to emigrate to the country instead of economic migrants simply seeking more prosperity, which is currently in conflict with the bias against Muslims which is pervasive in our society given that many of the incoming refugees are often Muslim or Arabic. Due to this, Islamophobia often shapes public perception of refugees and misconstrues them as a threat (Adida et al., 2018). One group particularly affected by this biased perspective are Syrian refugees, who currently comprise the greatest portion of refugees in the world today.

### *Syrian Women*

The Syrian War is responsible for creating the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known, with approximately half of the entire population fleeing the country by 2016 (Hassan et al., 2016). Survivors have endured a significant amount of trauma from the experiences that caused them to seek refugee status, and more research is needed to fully

understand the impact of this trauma both on the individuals who experienced it and on the surrounding communities (George, 2012). Women and children make up the largest portion of displaced individuals from the Syrian War; in fact, they comprise nearly 80% of those displaced (Samira et al., 2014). During war times, women are at increased risk of gender-based violence (Asaf, 2017; Berti, 2015). Furthermore, women's preferences and experiences are often excluded and not taken into consideration during any subsequent restoration processes which means that their unique needs are not attended to (Asaf, 2017). There are several intersectional issues to take into consideration when viewing Syrian women's needs during this crisis. It is important to understand the impact that various systems have on each individual woman (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016).

The chronic and critical nature of the Syrian crisis greatly increases Syrian women's vulnerability (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016). Mothers are at even greater risk due to the multiple burdens and responsibilities placed upon them. Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers to understand their needs and provide targeted support for these women (Vervliet et al., 2014). Many Syrian women may be distrustful of social workers and other helpers because of negative experiences they had in the refugee camps with workers exploiting and harassing them or being discriminatory to them. It is important that interventions for Syrian women are multi-systemic and target the greater social pressures impacting these refugees instead of simply interpersonal interventions as this often places a greater burden upon them (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). One study notes conflict between government policy and refugee perceptions –Syrian women view their most important role as that of a mother, whereas policies view them first as “refugees” and do not make a distinction

from non-mothers. This can cause significant stress for refugee mothers, post-resettlement (Vervliet et al., 2014).

There is limited insight into Syrian refugee mothers and their experiences (Ahmed et al., 2017), although the available literature recommends that host countries specifically respond to the needs of Syrian refugee women (Lancet, 2013). In order to do so, it is important to consider power and control issues with refugees and to allow Syrians to collectively determine options and solutions to healing and to determine their own narratives (Hassan et al., 2016). Furthermore, as women are the most vulnerable and most affected by the conflict in Syria and mothers are even more at risk due to their vulnerability and social burdens, it is imperative that they are actively included in the post-resettlement rebuilding process (Asaf, 2017). This is particularly true as resettlement policies frequently do not consider the multiple roles of mother and limits their choices in life (Vervliet et al., 2014). Additionally, many refugees report being re-traumatized by the resettlement process itself (George, 2012) which further complicates concerns in this population. Experts note that due to the critically pervasive nature of this crisis, repatriation of Syrian refugees will not be possible and therefore, measures must be taken to address refugee needs and concerns (Berti, 2015). With all of this in mind, it is necessary to increase understanding of the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers to improve their lives and the quality of services provided to them in their new countries.

Though the majority of refugees are female, regarding age, most of the refugee population is comprised of children (UNHCR, 2017). Thus, there cannot be a conversation pertaining to the experiences of refugee women without discussing refugee mothers. It is estimated that up to 26% of refugee mothers experience physical or sexual

abuse in the year prior to conception (Berman et al., 2014), which may extend to controlling measures to maintain a refugee mother's dependency on her husband. One study of Canadian migrant women – which included refugees – notes that men may accomplish this by limiting their wives' ability to learn English or in seeking gainful employment. Refugee mothers may not report such abuse due to their reliance on their husbands (Mehta & Gagnon, 2016), precluding the women from receiving support from outside agencies.

The added stress of adjustment post-resettlement can provide significant strain on refugee well-being. Common stressors that can prolong distress include acculturation, barriers to employment, lack of housing (Bentley et al., 2012), and negative perceptions (Schoeb et al., 2007). There is some indication that resettlement stress can have as much impact on refugee well-being as pre-migration trauma, making studies on post-migration stress imperative (McCleary, 2017). One study highlighted the particular stress-related plight of women by noting that in Asian refugees, females report higher stress levels in 80% of life domains (Koh et al., 2013), while another study notes that post-resettlement stress can negatively impact parent-child relationships (McCleary, 2017).

Further, a traumatic event in a refugee mother's life has been shown to impact her parenting and the well-being of her children (Levi, 2014). For refugee mothers, pre-migration trauma can exacerbate post-migration stress, leading to poor overall biopsychosocial outcomes long after resettlements (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012) and negatively impacting their children as well. Refugee mothers often struggle with adjusting to a new culture, having been traditionally responsible for child rearing and family care, which can limit their employability with limited employment experience

(Haffejee & East, 2016). As a result, many refugee mothers end up below the poverty line (Goodman et al., 2017), which creates additional stress and trauma after resettlement. Despite many challenges, refugee mothers expressed an ideological view of motherhood and an intense need to keep their children safe, and their future-oriented focus is an indication of resilience in this population (Berman et al., 2014). In order to promote such resilience, however, multiple facets of refugee mothers' lives and methods of coping with such traumatic events need to be assessed in order to best serve the women.

While all refugee situations are critical, the ongoing Syrian war has created the largest refugee crisis the world has ever seen before, with multiple resettlements causing significant post-traumatic stress symptoms for survivors (Hassan et al., 2016). Of those displaced, women and children comprise the majority of these individuals at a stunning 78% of this population (Samira et al., 2014). The implications of this war on women and girls is astounding – Syrian females are at heightened risk of abuse and isolation (Hassan et al., 2016). Many resort to engaging in sexual acts to ensure survival (Charles & Denman, 2013). Nearly half of the female youth population are unable to continue their education, which directly impacts the age that these girls are becoming mothers. The level of education a girl receives is directly correlated to the number of pregnancies she has and the health and well-being of her children (Charles & Denman, 2013). Exposure to war trauma has been noted to negatively impact the mother-child bond (Smetana et al., 2015), and 74% of mothers report a lack of emotional coping skills to handle their experiences (Charles & Denman, 2013). The Syrian war's impact on mothers is a risk for the Syrian population as a whole (Charles & Denman, 2013).

Given the history of social work's engagement with refugees historically, the NASW's call to social workers to support those affected by the Syrian refugee crisis, and the critical effects of the war on mothers specifically, it is imperative that the profession takes a deeper look at the dynamics surrounding Syrian women and the social workers who are supporting them. This dissertation study will seek to discover more about the relationship between Syrian refugee women and the social workers who engage with them and to identify the perceptions of social workers towards the target population. It will address ways that social workers can support Syrian refugee women (specifically mothers) and will assist with filling a gap in understanding the readiness of social workers (specifically in North Carolina) to support Syrian refugee women once they are allowed into the country again. The knowledge gained from this study has the potential to influence practice in many settings ranging from enhancing resettlement services to local refugee mothers, to providing mental health care, and even to improving medical interventions for these women. The state refugee agencies may use the knowledge gained to help prepare trainings for social workers to target support interventions and increase cultural competency.

### *Theoretical Frame*

Globalization is an increasing concern for the field of social work in part due to the migration of refugees. While there is frequent scholarship in social work on the impact of globalization, there are limited options which challenge the dominant power dynamics in society. Despite the involvement of countries such as the U.S. in wars which produce refugees, there is often reluctance to accept refugees and provide for them within the nation. Thus, social workers frequently find themselves in the position to find ways to

provide for refugee clients within a welfare state which opposes such provisions (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). This puts social workers in direct conflict with the ethical standard to provide for the most vulnerable in society (NASW, 2017) and the regulations of the state or nation in which they work (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

Therefore, for the purposes of this dissertation it is necessary to adopt a perspective which encompasses not only the rights and needs of Syrian refugee women, but which considers the effects of a global economy upon local policy as well.

Feminism in the U.S. has historically marginalized those who are non-white; therefore it is imperative that white feminists take an intersectional stance which purposely includes aspects such as race, class, religion, and ethnicity in order to move beyond unilateral discussions of socioeconomic status as the primary driving force of limitations on women's lives (Lawrence 2017). Much of traditional feminism has actually oppressed non-white, non-Western women through imperial and capitalistic aims. President Bush's so-called War on Terror, for example, used feminist rhetoric to justify military force by claiming to liberate women. The result was the imposition of Western, white feminist ideals upon brown Muslim women instead. Islam is often only depicted in a negative and monolithic fashion, despite a rich history of its own feminism (Gurel, 2019).

Islamic feminisms are very diverse but frequently focused on highlighting the importance of women's roles and challenging injustice in society. However, Western feminists often fail to acknowledge Islamic feminisms because the Islamic perspectives often derives strength from faith, whereas Western feminism often derives strength outside of it (Navarro, 2016). These perspectives often strive for sociopolitical change

while honoring the agency of Islamic women in their own lives (Navarro, 2016; Azam, 2018), and thus this dissertation seeks to honor this approach as well by challenging some of the dominant practices with regards to Syrian women with refugee status and encouraging the inclusion of their views throughout the resettlement process.

Historically, feminism in the United States can be categorized into four “waves” or time periods of activity. The First Wave started in the mid-1800s with early activism around political rights including voting access. The second wave began in the 1960s and focused on securing equal rights for women, albeit the focus was primarily on white women as well (Lawrence, 2017). Feminism became globalized after 1975 when the United Nations began to focus more intently on the needs of women. This period solidified the Second Wave of feminism, and in the decade that followed women in Latin America and the Middle East began heavily questioning the unity of the feminist movement based solely on merit of being female (Gurel, 2019).

The Third Wave emerged from international advocacy in the 1990s which began to shift the narrative to be more inclusive and focus on an intersectional approach (Lawrence, 2017). International feminism came out of these feminists who began expressing solidarity with women around the world. During the 1980s and 1990s, feminist activists rallied around the collective oppressions and mutual strengths of women in the international community (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). This wave of feminists began to look more closely at issues of power based on Foucault’s analysis of language and relationships in society, amongst other dynamics. In doing so, they began to question the validity of a feminism which focuses only on the needs of white, heteronormative, middle class women (Navarro, 2016). However, many in marginalized

communities criticized their lack of acknowledgement of the ways that racial injustice affects outcomes for certain women around the world (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

Additionally, critics felt that these feminists did not take into account the impact of policy on the lives of women as well. A primary failure of international feminism is that it views women's struggles from a primarily White, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied lens (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). Within the context of human rights issues, addressing women's rights specifically is still relatively new. Women's rights have only successfully been considered under a human rights umbrella since 1995. Within this framework, the focus is often on violence against women but this is conceptualized as individual problems with interpersonal violence (Merry, 2006). To counter this unilateral viewpoint, the concept of intersectionality – or incorporating multiple identities into a rich and unique understanding of an individual – emerged.

Intersectionality holds the potential to be a driving force behind significant social change, including a more equitable distribution of power throughout society (Lawrence, 2017). The concept of intersectionality in praxis looks at structural forms of oppression within society. It considers justice for marginalized communities as related to the interactions between their varied identities and those in positions of power, and ways to offset the inherent imbalance within. The researcher engaging in intersectional work must consider how theory and best practices interplay and be mindful of their influence in this process as well. It is not enough to simply understand the problems presented, but one must seek to challenge and transform them in order to work towards a more just society (Cho et al., 2013).

It is out of these critiques and discussion of intersectionality that transnational feminism was born (Gurel, 2019). The current fourth wave began in the early 2000s and comprises a more globally comprehensive view (Lawrence, 2017). Transnational feminism is a direct response to the white homogeneity of second wave feminism, which views all issues pertaining to women as similar due solely to virtue of being of the same gender. It has also recently become the dominant feminist perspective with regards to issues in developing nations (Herr, 2014) - including Syria. Research through this lens seeks to shift the conversation away from dominant Western (often white patriarchal) perspectives and epistemologies to instead encompass the varied experiences of women from a globally connected viewpoint (Hundle et al., 2019). Additionally, transnational feminism acknowledges the tendency of nations such as the United States to utilize both military aggression and the resulting unequal global power dynamics to destabilize global systems for its own gain (Fernandes, 2013), the resulting burden of which is often borne by the refugees who are displaced by these actions.

With a transnational feminist perspective, we can begin to broaden the dominant feminist discussion regarding violence against women to include violence and oppression brought about by various government policies (Merry, 2006). This newer form of globalized feminism deals with intersectional oppressions in social, political, and economic spheres and ways that issues of race, class, and gender are impacted in these arenas. There is a significant focus on policies of the nation-state which oppress women and determining ways to undo this through organized resistance. Transnational feminism seeks to understand women both within their own cultural context and within the context of the location in which they reside. Within a global context, there is criticism of

capitalistic exploitation and militarism which cause collective oppression. Transnational feminism does not seek to “help” women from an imbalanced power dynamic, but to find mutual sources of strength and commonalities through which to grow together and dismantle oppression ((Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

Transnational feminism provides methods for challenging oppressions and building connections between multiple countries in a global context. Transnational feminists focus on understanding the experiences of women who live between or across borders such as different nations or geopolitical boundaries, including refugees. There is a focus on intersectionality and social justice which challenges the idea that women around the world all share the same experiences by virtue of being female (Enns et al., 2020). This perspective also adopts a critical look at ways in which scholarly works and interdisciplinary fields may contribute to the creation of unequal power dynamics and unintentionally contribute to cycles of oppression in the very populations they seek to support (Fernandes, 2013). Core principles include building efforts to foster connection and solidarity between women from different regions by framing discussions around the voices of those who are more marginalized and challenging unequal power dynamics. Terminology is frequently rephrased to create resistance or affirm empowerment; for instance, using Global North and South or Minority/Majority instead of terms such as First and Third World (Enns et al., 2020).

It is imperative that social work in the U.S. acknowledges the interaction of the country’s global decisions on perpetuating inequality and their participation in these processes in order to accurately address inequity. Feminism as a whole offers unique perspectives for social work regarding intersectionality, but transnational feminism

provides an excellent lens for international social work practice due to the focus on global interconnectedness (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). Adopting a transnational lens is particularly important when discussing refugee related issues due to the presence of transnational policies set by transnational organizations such as the United Nations. Transnational policies (such as refugee resettlement) are often framed in terms of human rights issues, but there can be significant resistance by those with power in society who often cite cultural preferences as justification (Merry, 2006).

Transnational feminism can help the field of social work grow significantly by realizing that the boundaries which divide individuals are ever-changing due to issues of globalization, to intentionally consider ways that our nation's foreign policies affect the clients we work with, and by encouraging U.S. social workers to accept the strengths of foreign-born women as valuable and distinct without needing to be fully acculturated to be accepted by society. Furthermore, the concept of national boundaries are much less fluid with transnational feminism, so for refugee women this means that they are able to maintain/develop identities both to their home country and their host country. Social workers in their new home would pay special attention to maintaining ties in their home country as well as adjusting to their new society (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

Additionally, transnational feminism offers social workers a lens through which to view the impact of global process on the local issues in which they work and shifts the focus from being only local practitioners to also global practitioners. It also provides key insight when analyzing the effects of policies and the effect on those they serve. Finally, transnational feminism offers social work more space to accept and understand various social and personal identities without the need to separate "us" and "them" or "here" and

“there” because of the global perspective it encompasses (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010).

However, here are limitations to transnational feminism in the academic space. In the U.S., academic perspectives tend to take a postmodern approach which overly simplifies issues and at times negates the impact of race and culture on violence and oppression. It is important to recognize where the limits of solidarity end and where it is necessary to recognize how our differences shape the experiences women have in order to understand various journeys through appropriate frameworks. In such settings, transnational feminism can become an item to be capitalized upon instead of a tool to challenge socio-political frameworks which cause harm (Mohanty, 2013). Particularly for researchers and academics in the United States, there must be caution against utilizing transnational feminism as another means of creating U.S.-centric discourse (Fernandes, 2013).

Transnational feminism rejects the concept of universal applicability of feminist standards and frequently reject nationalism due to the belief that this stance tends to harm women overall. Feminists with this perspective seek to form coalitions and community bonds which challenge sociopolitical structures causing oppression (Herr, 2014). Therefore, this dissertation will remain mindful to focus on inquiry which seeks to bring about positive social change for Syrian women with refugee status while maintaining a critical lens towards the predominant social work processes steeped in Western, white, and Judeo-Christian values as the norm for practice. Furthermore, this dissertation adopts a matricentric (mother-focused) stance when appropriate given that Syrian mothers are amongst the most vulnerable within this population (Vervliet et al., 2014).

### *Research Rationale*

Since the beginning of the President Trump's administration, there has been a significant change in refugee resettlement policy with disturbing trends specifically impacting Muslim refugees. As of FY 2017, a sharp increase in Christian refugee admissions and significant decrease in Muslim refugee admissions has occurred whereas in prior years there was roughly a 50-50 split (Social Justice Brief, 2019). Social work has a significant impact on the discussions related to refugees and their outcomes (Park, 2008). According to a Pew Research survey, in 2017 the U.S. population was nearly equally divided as to whether the nation should accept Syrian refugees or not (Pew Research Center, 2017). As some of the recent policy changes include approval from states instead of federal mandates to accept refugees (Social Justice Brief, 2019), it is necessary to gain an understanding of state-specific perceptions of refugees. Since Syrian women are arguably amongst the most vulnerable refugees in current existence, and since North Carolina was amongst the top 10 states to resettle Syrians when they were allowed into the country and is therefore likely to be amongst the top resettlement locations when the Executive Order colloquially termed the "Muslim Ban" is eventually lifted, it is important to understand the views of North Carolina social workers towards them.

A key responsibility of social workers is to advocate for the rights of refugees, especially in this current sociopolitical climate which is hostile towards both refugees and Arab/Muslim populations. Despite increasing interest in the welfare of refugee populations within the field of social work, ongoing advocacy is needed to improve education on their unique needs and the importance of social work interventions with refugees. According to Popescu & Libal (2018), some assert that one way to accomplish

this is to ensure an understanding of social work practice intersection with refugees. However, one key gap in research is an understanding of the extent of involvement of social workers in refugee issues including ways in which they are providing support and areas needing additional improvement (Popescu & Libal, 2018). Therefore, this dissertation research endeavors to fill part of this critical gap in the research.

Overall, this dissertation will attempt to answer the following overarching questions:

1. How can social workers effectively support Syrian women with refugee status while they integrate into society?
2. In what ways can the integration of faith and practice be utilized to support Syrian women with refugee status?
3. What are the dynamics between Syrian women with refugee status and North Carolina resettlement processes?
4. What is the experience of Syrian women with refugee with North Carolina resettlement workers?
5. How do North Carolina social workers perceive Syrian women with refugee status?
6. What knowledge do North Carolina social workers feel they need in order to work effectively with Syrian women with refugee status?
7. What are the policy and practice implications of these insights?

## *Conclusion*

This dissertation investigates similarities and differences between the perspectives of Syrian mothers, resettlement workers, and state refugee agency employees regarding issues pertaining to the resettlement journey (Chapter Two), explores the perceptions of North Carolina social workers towards Syrian women with refugee status (Chapter Three), and provides a model for social workers who identify as Christian to create matricentric support circles for local mothers to welcome Syrian mothers with refugee status into the community (Chapter Four). Together, these chapters strive to create transformational change within the field of social work and to encourage social workers to rethink their engagement with Syrian women in order to ensure more just dynamics in society for Syrian women with refugee status as they restart their new lives in our midst.

## CHAPTER TWO

### "Because They Recognized us": Triangulated Perspectives of Syrian Mothers' Resettlement Experiences in the Eastern United States.

#### Abstract

Research indicates that post-resettlement experiences can be particularly challenging for people with refugee status. Despite finding safety in and adjusting to their new home, former refugees have indicated that this time can be stressful and even traumatic. The current Syrian crisis has created the largest wave of refugees ever known, and Syrian women are amongst the most vulnerable. However, women's needs and preferences are often not taken into consideration during the resettlement journey and when they are, there is no distinction between mothers and their childless counterparts. As social workers strive to empower the individual person within their environment, it is beneficial to understand the perspectives and preferences of Syrian mothers with refugee status regarding their post-resettlement experience. This qualitative study provides insight into factors affecting two Syrian mothers post-resettlement and triangulates the perspectives of these women with those of local resettlement workers and state agency workers in order to understand similarities and differences in their views. The outcomes provide overarching themes to their interview responses and recommendations for change in both policy and practice.

*Keywords: refugees, resettlement, Syria, matricentric, transnational, qualitative, policy*

### *Introduction to the Study*

There are noted conflicts between government policies and the needs of mothers with refugee status, which can cause significant distress for these women post-resettlement (Vervliet et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important to learn more about their needs and perspectives in order to better inform both practice and policy. However, there is limited research into this area of focus and even fewer studies on the issues which affect Syrian mothers specifically. Researchers are encouraged to directly include Syrian women in post-resettlement issues to ensure their needs are properly met (Asaf, 2017). This study was conducted to assist with gaining a deeper understanding not only of issues which may be affecting Syrian mothers with refugee status post-resettlement, but to gain insight into how key players in the resettlement journey perceive those issues as well.

The Syrian war is responsible for creating the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known, with approximately half of the entire population displaced by 2016 (Hassan et al., 2016). Women and children make up the largest portion of displaced individuals from the Syrian war; in fact, they comprise nearly 80% of those displaced. (Samira, 2014). Despite this staggering gender disparity, women's perspectives are often not taken into consideration during many parts of the refugee journey, which means that their unique experiences and needs are not accounted for throughout this process as well (Asaf, 2017). There are multiple intersectional issues to take into consideration when viewing the needs of Syrian women with refugee status during this crisis and it is important to understand the impact that various systems at all levels of government and policy have on each individual woman (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016).

Syrian women are extremely vulnerable because of the ongoing and perilous nature of the Syrian conflict and subsequent refugee crisis (Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016), and mothers are at even greater risk due to the multiple burdens and responsibilities placed upon them. Therefore, it is necessary to further understand the experiences of Syrian mothers with refugee status to provide accurate support for their needs (Vervliet et al., 2014). It is important that interventions for Syrian women are multi-systemic and target the greater social pressures impacting them instead of simply providing interpersonal interventions as an individual focus may place greater burdens upon them (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). Additionally, there can be conflict amongst government policy and the perspectives of those affected by them; for example, many women view their most important role as that of a mother, whereas policies view them first as “refugees” and do not make a distinction in their needs and services compared to their childless counterparts. This can cause significant stress for refugee mothers post-resettlement (Vervliet et al., 2014).

There is a paucity of information in the literature regarding Syrian mothers with refugee status specifically (Ahmed, 2017), although the available literature recommends that host countries pay special attention to their needs (Lancet, 2013). To accomplish this, it is important to consider power and control issues and to ensure opportunities for Syrians to collectively determine healing solutions while controlling their own outcomes (Hassan et al., 2016). Furthermore, as women are amongst the most at risk in the Syrian crisis and mothers are even more so due to their limited support and the expectations placed upon them, it is imperative that they are actively included in the process of rebuilding their lives post-resettlement (Asaf, 2017). This is particularly important to be

mindful of given that resettlement policies rarely consider the multiple roles of mother, which limits their life choices. (Vervliet et al., 2014). Many former refugees have indicated that the resettlement process is re-traumatizing (George, 2012), which increases concerns for ensuring adequate understanding of post-resettlement issues in this population.

The post-resettlement experience of refugees is important to consider in the research context to gain a comprehensive perspective of the entire breadth of the refugee journey (George, 2012). Social workers are encouraged to conduct research which focuses specifically on the experiences of individuals in their resettlement journeys (Drolet et al., 2018). With this in mind, it is necessary to understand the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers to improve their lives and the quality of services provided in their new countries. This research study is a small pilot study on the experiences of Syrian refugee mothers, designed to build further knowledge regarding how state and local refugee services may impact these women. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how organizational processes impact the lives of Syrian mothers and to gain insight into their perspectives on resettlement overall.

### *Methodology*

This study is rooted in matricentric feminism and uses a hermeneutic phenomenological lens through which to understand the lived experiences of the Syrian women and resettlement workers who responded. Matricentric feminism holds that the role of mother is distinct from that of woman which brings additional sociopolitical challenges that childless women do not face. Additionally, this framework asserts that it is crucial to understand the needs and perspectives of mothers in society to fully empower

all women (O'Reilly, 2019). Phenomenology is in itself a philosophical base which values first person experiences and studies perception to find meaning in life. There is not an initial hypothesis laid out but rather an understanding that meaning will come from the data, and the researcher holds no preconceived notions about the outcomes of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach aims to understand the lived experience of others and aligns well with feminist thought as it is focused not only on understanding the lived experience of individuals, but the reality and application of this knowledge to real world scenarios. A feminist approach is concerned with the everyday experiences of women and phenomenology provides a theoretical base through which to analyze this (Garko, 1999). This perspective also values a non-generalizable approach as individual stories hold merit in their own right with the goal of understanding unique experiences (van Manen, 2016), and thus is appropriate for inquiring about the experiences of two Syrian women.

Additionally, transnational issues are well suited to phenomenology for understanding the lived experiences of mothers who are separated from their children. Indeed, the separation of mother and child across borders affects not only the individual family members, but their bond and shared connection as well (Horton, 2009). As one of the mothers in this study was still separated from some of her children in Syria, and part of their reason for migration was for the safety of their children, this becomes a particularly salient lens through which to view responses. A transnational feminist perspective strives to understand the lives of women within not only their own cultural perspectives but within the context in their local culture. It also offers a valuable lens for the social work profession to understand globalized issues (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff,

2010), such as refugee resettlement. Some experts argue that these transnational perspectives should frame the forefront of discussion around refugee rights (Fernandes, 2013). Therefore, this study adopts a transnational, matricentric feminist approach which centers the needs of the Syrian mothers at the forefront and seek to understand the ways that their culture and the dominant sociopolitical context of their location affects their lives.

The study was designed as a pilot study consisting of semi-structured qualitative interviews with two state refugee office employees, two local refugee resettlement agency workers, and two Syrian refugee mothers. This study was intentionally designed to triangulate the perspective of three key players in the local refugee resettlement system: the state agency, a local agency, and the resettled refugee women themselves. The rationale for this design was to enable observation of data at each “tier” in the system (state-local-individual) to be able to analyze patterns, connections, and gaps along the service chain. Interviews were semi-structured to allow for follow up questions as necessary and were conducted separately in order to ensure that there were not any concerns about agreement bias if participants were in the room together.

The sampling frame consisted of individuals within an urban area in an East Coast state. Specific location information is not provided in order to protect identities. Six IRB-approved semi-structured interviews were scheduled in 60-minute time blocks and trained interpreter was utilized for the refugee participants. All participants were provided with copies of informed consent paperwork and the content was thoroughly explained to the participants with refugee status via trained an Arabic-speaking interpreter. The Syrian women were clearly informed that participation is not connected to any programs or

services and participation or refusal would not affect eligibility either, as sometimes those with refugee status may believe that researchers are connected to or the same as case workers. According to a UNHCR report, issues with trust and mistrust between refugees and researchers are of paramount concern and therefore researchers should take extra precaution to attend to potential ethical issues (Hynes, 2003).

Participants were identified through personal contacts and word of mouth and comprised a sample of convenience. Due to the political restraints on Syrian migration under the Trump administration, there were few options available for refugee participants. The two refugee women selected were resettled together and are extended family members; however, the span in their age range indicated that they might hold different perspectives on the same experience due to generational viewpoints. Thus, it was determined that although their experiences may be similar from having been resettled together, their input would still be valuable to this research project. Of the available staff participants, two case managers were selected at the local refugee office as they were the employees with the most direct experience with the Syrian population, and two employees at the state office were selected for the diversity in their experience. Further information on their positions is not included in their narrative in order to maintain anonymity.

The interviews took place in private rooms to protect participant confidentiality, and were audio recorded. A trained Arabic speaking interpreter was utilized to assist with translation during the interviews with the Syrian mothers. The researcher took notes during the interview to aid with both observation and recall. As phenomenological perspectives believe that standard data collection techniques such as surveys or

questionnaires will elicit only a partial response, the researcher intentionally utilized semi structured in person interviews in order to observe the person in environment and account for non-verbal cues.

### *Data Analysis*

The audio recordings were transcribed and any identifying features were removed to ensure the privacy of the participants. From there, the transcriptions were reviewed multiple times and coded for themes and sub themes. These were arranged into “clusters of meaning”, with repetitive content removed for conciseness (Moustakas, 2010). The initial review consisted of in vivo coding, followed by clustering the codes into chunks of meaning, and organization into overarching themes (Saldana, 2016). Initial codes were created through ongoing comparison between narratives which were then merged into overarching themes (van Manen, 2016). The researcher settled on four to five themes per participant and organized the codes accordingly. The researcher then ordered and reordered the data to complete the narrative (Saldana, 2016).

As this research takes a hermeneutic approach, it is not necessary for the researcher to bracket out personal experiences as it is often these experiences which led to the interest in understanding more about the phenomenon in question (Neubauer et al., 2019). The researcher has ties with the local resettlement agency as she was a former employee, which assisted with “buy in” from the agency staff and an understanding of several of the processes discussed throughout the interviews. However, as more than five years had passed since the employment period, the staff members interviewed were people whom the researcher had no previous contact with and the Syrian women were not people the interviewer had resettled during her employment. The background knowledge

of refugee resettlement provided subjective insight during the interpretive process which was subsequently incorporated into the analysis (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenological reduction was utilized to interpret and re-interpret data until it is synthesized into a final comprehensive understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These themes were then analyzed in context of the researcher's knowledge, observations, and theoretical framework and consolidated into the overarching themes discussed below.

### *Participants*

#### *Syrian Mothers*

The Syrian participants were both resettled together and had been in the country for less than three years. One participant was in her 50s and the other was in her mid-20s, and thus bring different life experiences and perspectives. Both were mothers, and one interviewee identified concern for her adult children's lives and a desire to protect them from being drafted into the military as a motivating factor for migration. This was a significant fear because in Syria drafted sons often never return home. The younger participant was in her second trimester of pregnancy, which she noted was only possible because of the medical care received in the United States. Both women completed a high school education and were in caregiving roles prior to coming to the United States. Neither participant was currently employed. Both identified as Muslim.

#### *Resettlement Agency Workers*

The local agency employees were fairly new to working in the refugee resettlement area with less than five years of combined experience but had significant backgrounds in education on refugee issues and direct work with refugee populations.

One participant completed their Masters Thesis on the Syrian War and has extensive knowledge of not only the political underpinnings of the Syrian refugee crisis but also of the Syrian people themselves. The other had completed work with Syrian women focused on empowerment support post resettlement for two years previously. They each spoke at least one refugee language including Arabic and noted that they felt drawn to resettlement work based on their educational experiences and desires to work cross-culturally.

### *State Agency Workers*

The state employees have nearly 50 years of combined experience working both with refugees and in policy. They provided a variety of information and perspectives, which reflected the richness of their differing roles and experiences in refugee resettlement. Their backgrounds included work in Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) roles and teaching English as a second language in multiple countries. Both participants supported refugees directly and indirectly from several waves of refugee crises from around the world. Direct interactions include supporting the Somali Bantu people in Kenyan camps to receiving Syrian refugees directly out of boats on the shores of Greece, while indirect work includes engaging in policy initiatives and providing guidance to the refugee resettlement agencies. Their diverse experiences provided a wealth of knowledge during the discussion times.

### *Emerging Themes*

There was some repetitive content that began to unfold from the beginning of the process, as there were several aspects of the resettlement journey that multiple

participants began to discuss. This included barriers such as housing availability, financial strain, policy constraints, and lack of communication throughout the procedural chain. Some of these were universal throughout the participants, especially with regards to difficulties securing or affording housing, and some were specific only to each group of participants, such as employment preferences or cultural perceptions.

There was a distinct apprehension regarding concerns for budget allocations in October 2018 under the Trump presidential administration, and an understanding that this political climate is hostile to refugees. Beyond that though, there was a general pattern of a communication breakdown in government processes, some of which may impact refugees on their resettlement journey. Many issues come from lack of communication between different departments in the DHHS system (such as Medicaid), a lack of understanding of inter-departmental requirements which sometimes resulted in refugees being placed on incorrect programs, and frustrations which arose from lack of clear directives from the agencies above them – which was true for staff at both locations.

Overall, the following overarching themes emerged: *Policy Constraints and Systemic Barriers, Responsibility and Role Strain, Syrian Women's Needs and Strengths, and Recommendations for Change*. The final category had several subthemes relating to areas of change as well. These are all discussed at length below.

#### *Policy Constraints and Systemic Barriers*

Participants were quick to identify concerns with the policies under the presidential administration and ways that these are impacting refugee resettlement throughout the process. Issues addressed include the controversial “Muslim Ban” created by the Trump administration, reduced arrivals of refugees due to the limitations imposed

on the refugee resettlement program, fiscal cuts, and family separation. Having several decades of experience, the state workers were able to speak to changes resulting from the Trump administration in comparison to previous administrations. Perceptions of these changes were not positive, and even tinged with fear. There were concerns mentioned not only about how this is impacting the resettlement program but how this is affecting the view of the United States on a global scale. One participant summed this up as follows:

None of the periods in history are like the period we're seeing right now...this may be the lowest point actually. The infrastructure that has been in place for years to help refugees find safe haven in this country and to actually become participating member of society will be decimated. We used to be leaders in terms of responding to humanitarian crises. I'm not so sure people see us that way anymore.

This respondent was particularly focused on refugee resettlement as being a humanitarian response which should come from a place of compassion and expressed confusion over how this has been so deeply politicized. A similar sentiment was echoed by a local agency worker during the interviews: "I think that the United States is hurting its reputation by not accepting refugees. For example, the extreme vetting procedures have effectively shut down migration from Syria." When questioned about the impact on Syrians specifically this year, the response was startling: out of all of the arrivals this year, none were Syrian. Yet another employee expressed frustrations with the impact of the policies on the program as a whole: "The arrivals have gone way down since this current administration started. The United States has definitely gone downhill in terms of the quality of the refugee resettlement program, just due to the lack of arrivals and funding."

All of the employees felt that the political changes such as extreme vetting of Muslim refugees were xenophobic and anti-immigrant, and specifically designed to cause

fear both in the U.S. population and in the refugees themselves. In fact, one employee shared worries about the culture in the United States as a result of these policies and surrounding rhetoric as well as how this affects the perception of refugees and ultimately their reception.

There are a great number of folks in our society who are coming from a place that I've never seen. They are not open to listening... I think after they hear the real story they might be inclined to be more favorable in their perception of who refugees are.

The systemic concern repeatedly mentioned regarding negative attitudes amongst people in the United States underscored concerns about how these attitudes impact the way community members interact with and talk about refugees, and how this informs how they vote - which ultimately impacts the policies regarding refugee resettlement.

Suggested remedies from the participants for negative mindsets and inaccurate perceptions relied heavily on the belief that public education and hearing stories directly from refugees themselves would ameliorate the problem. Indeed, there is existing research to indicate that this is accurate, particularly when these stories are presented by the media (Hoewe, 2018). There is also evidence that perspective taking exercises designed to consider issues from the perspective of refugees can increase acceptance towards them, but only temporarily (Adida et al., 2018). However, experts caution that this approach can also unintentionally further marginalization against refugees as well (Kisiara, 2015).

There was additional concern about how these immigration policies are affecting the refugees themselves. Besides severely restricting refugee migration, everyone addressed ways that this impacts the Syrian families who are already here yet have family members who have not been able to arrive. Some employees mentioned that this causes

the refugee clients to live in a perpetual state of worrying and re-traumatization while awaiting updates from family abroad. This concern has been identified in the literature as well. George (2012) notes that family separation can use signification increases in anxiety and depression post-resettlement as this is a reminder of the severity of loss experienced by their refugee journey (George, 2012) and is considered one of the top post-migration stressors (Malm et al., 2020). Indeed, the Syrian women alluded to this distress in their interviews as well. One woman remarked: “I think perhaps people from Syria and some other countries who want to come here, can’t. They aren’t letting us. I worry because our family is still over there and we want them here. But this is a government issue.” The Syrian women did not have as much knowledge or concern about the policies but knew that they were unable to be reunited with their family at this time.

Besides the impact of federal immigration policies, there were several concerns at the state and local levels too. These included issues within the social service system itself. An example provided was a lack of understanding as to how refugees access Medicaid support by the Medicaid caseworkers, resulting in clients being placed on the incorrect programs which could result in refugees needing to repay the state for an issue that was not their fault. All three groups of participants identified Medicaid as an extremely complicated and stressful issue. The Syrian women noted that they were eager to access medical care in the United States for various personal and family related needs but were distressed when they learned that Medicaid ends after 8 months of being in the country. One woman noted that she had to stop necessary treatments as a result of this policy.

Additional concerns from the state employees stemmed from federal and state policies, including frustrations with the Office of Refugee Resettlement’s lack of clarity

on certain expectations. They also identified a lack of housing coupled with rising housing costs, and financial strain not only from employment concerns but also from the small stipends refugees are initially provided not having the purchase power that it had in previous years. The Syrian women addressed obtaining funding to pay for rent as a main stressor in their lives, and local agency respondents explained this further in the context of the system. The case workers found that even existing partnerships with apartment complexes willing to rent to refugees are beginning to have unrealistic expectations. One respondent explained that landlords who were previously willing to waive expectations such as credit checks - since refugees have no credit upon arrival – were no longer willing to do so, leaving fewer locations for clients to move in to.

Issues such as this place additional burdens on both the local agency case workers who are tasked with securing housing for clients, and burdens the clients who need a place to live as well. An additional factor in this situation is the lack of public transportation in the area, which can then make it difficult to access employment because the affordable housing is usually farther away from the main parts of the cities. One resettlement worker highlighted cultural differences as in Syria there is an understanding that community support acts as homelessness prevention; therefore, the U.S. the concept of being evicted due to lack of rent payment is completely foreign to these women. The workers expressed concerns for the added stress this places on newly arrived refugees.

### *Responsibilities and Role Strain*

This was a theme that was consistent amongst the interviewees but had very different connotations amongst the groups. The Syrian mothers viewed their roles as caregivers and keepers of the family home. One woman was pleased to explain that in

addition to medical care received here, her chronically ill husband was doing well because she was able to care for him daily. As these women were resettled together and were extended family members, they also viewed their responsibilities as intertwined. The younger participant mentioned that she has been helping her mother in law in to take care of the home since she married her husband in Syria, and that this is an important aspect of their lives which creates a sense of shared meaningful connection for them. Both women identified role strain as stemming from more systemic issues. Additionally, being able to pay for housing was a difficulty that they encountered, and this actually caused conflict with one of the case workers at their resettlement agency. They felt judged, and were frustrated that they were not able to access assistance: “We were struggling to pay rent and the caseworker denied our struggles and said ‘no I won’t help, your situation is not bad, there are others who need more help than you.’ So we didn’t get the referral for assistance.” The women felt rejected by the case workers when they asked for help.

Local agency employees had a more personal view of their responsibilities with refugees. They felt that connection with resources and volunteers, providing teaching and training to build skills, and being supportive while advocating for clients were all integral components in their jobs. Like their state counterparts, they described an aspect of interacting with the general public to facilitate understanding and remove stigma surrounding refugees as well. To complement the concern about policy constraints on agency staff, one participant noted that their job actually filled the requirements of what was previously two roles - citing a lack of funding as a constraint – while lamenting:

“How much impact are we really having when there are millions of refugees in the world who are in need and we are not allowed to service them because of these policies?”

Another worker explained that the financial cuts meant that they weren't able to make as many home visits as they prefer to do, which leaves them feeling more disconnected from clients. Despite the role strain, staff members highlighted a positive work environment, supportive management, and a sense of tenacity as ways they cope with the stress. One additional role strain mentioned by this group was frustration with working in a state with unequal resources compared to other states and confusion amongst communication with the state agency workers, which they felt was lacking in clear guidelines and expectations.

Thus, the resettlement workers felt role strain both from client needs and from state agency communication (or lack thereof), indicating a bilateral stress on their positions. This type of pressure from both clients and superiors can potentially place case workers in greatest risk of issues such as compassion fatigue and burnout, which may also lead to higher turnover rates.

Regarding role strain, the state workers felt that the policy constraints placed the most stress on their work and acknowledged the impact this had on local agency workers as well. One participant summed it up by saying: “There is a trickle-down effect which leaves very thinly staffed resettlement agencies.” There was mention of service delivery becoming lower quality under pressure, but respondents were quick to mention that agency workers are always creative and invested in the well-being of the refugees served.

State employees viewed their responsibilities as acting as a conduit between federal and local realms. They felt that part of their task was to remove systemic barriers

to empower refugees and open opportunities, although this is in slight conflict with their expectation of upholding policy rules as some of those have been identified as barriers in the above section. Cross-cultural work was important to them and teamwork and helpfulness were valued. Finally, they felt that communicating and being available to answer questions that agencies might have was an integral part of their role. However, while the state workers feel that this is an important aspect of their work, the local agency workers feel that there is a disconnect in communication and the state agency is not always available, indicating a potential avenue of improvement.

From these discussions, it is apparent that each group feels stress they believe results from the group above them. This is related to a communication breakdown in the process which might be rectified with better planning, clearer expectations, and open channels of inquiry. This dynamic has also been previously described in the literature, and the communication breakdown is known to cause additional distress for refugees post-resettlement (George, 2012).

### *Syrian Women's Needs and Strengths*

The Syrian participants expressed feeling torn between their household duties and the need to bring income to the family. They held a desire to work in order to help support the household but had caveats about how to do so. The elder woman wanted to be able to work from home, noting that she has skills in cooking but is willing to do anything that allows her to work from home. She expressed a need for knowledge regarding her available options when asked what work she might like to do: "Anything really. But I think making food or chocolate or anything I can do from home...but I don't know what my options are." Her younger counterpart also expressed a desire to work but

had more acceptance of leaving the home for employment. However, she wanted to be sure that it was a job that she was comfortable with. She identified a preference for direct involvement in the employment process and the need to make her own decisions: “I would want to talk to the owner or the manager of the job and find out directly what I need to do, and then if I feel comfortable, I will do it.” Both the resettlement workers and the state workers also identified a desire to work as a positive trait of this population and felt that their strong work ethic was a great strength.

Additional needs expressed included a curiosity about how to navigate the local processes. With regards to the caseworker with whom they had conflict, the women stated that they were not aware that they could speak to someone at the agency or state level to make a complaint or request additional services. One woman stated that it would have been helpful to be provided with a handout detailing how to access various services and important phone numbers. She showed no concern regarding the ability to address/meet their needs, but simply stated that she did not know *how* to do this because she did not know how to navigate the system.

Participants across all groups identified education as an important need, and the Syrian women confirmed this. These women explained that because of their ethnicity, they were excluded from achieving full educational access in Syria. One participant tied educational outcomes to her perception of successful refugee resettlement as she viewed education as a mean to self-sufficiency. The elder mother identified a hope that her sons will be able to attend college one day as well, and again both the resettlement workers and the state employees also felt that the drive for higher education not only for themselves but for their children was a strength that Syrian women bring with them.

The Syrian women identified their cultural orientation training as accurate in helping to prepare them for arrival, and that their understanding of U.S. culture was a strength which helped make resettlement transition easier. One woman explained thusly: “My expectation was as it is. I was told there was lot of opportunity and a chance to find jobs, people here respect other humans, and there is no racism. The cultural orientation program I had explained everything.” This was one area where the employee’s views differed significantly from that of the Syrian women though. Both the state and local workers felt that clients were not adequately prepared for life in the United States and expressed a preference for increased cultural training for this population in order to reframe their expectations about life in the United States.

While the agency participants were focused on ways to better equip refugees for adjustment to life in the United States, the women highlighted another important source of strength: connection to community supports. They identified connection with other Syrians or Arabs as vitally important, noting that if there were any serious problems this community would step in to provide support. However, when specifically asked about what helped to adjust to the new life in the overall U.S. community the most, the Syrian women found it difficult to identify one specific thing but managed to highlight broad community acceptance as an important factor:

We just got used to it. But what really helped was the treatment of the American people. They made us feel accepted. They recognized us and were very nice and made us feel included. And they even asked if we need anything else and we said no, we don’t need anything else [but to be included].

However, local agency respondents honed-in on more specific nuances of ways that Syrian women require trauma-informed support during their resettlement process, which is currently lacking. They feel that this is a component which can cause anxiety and

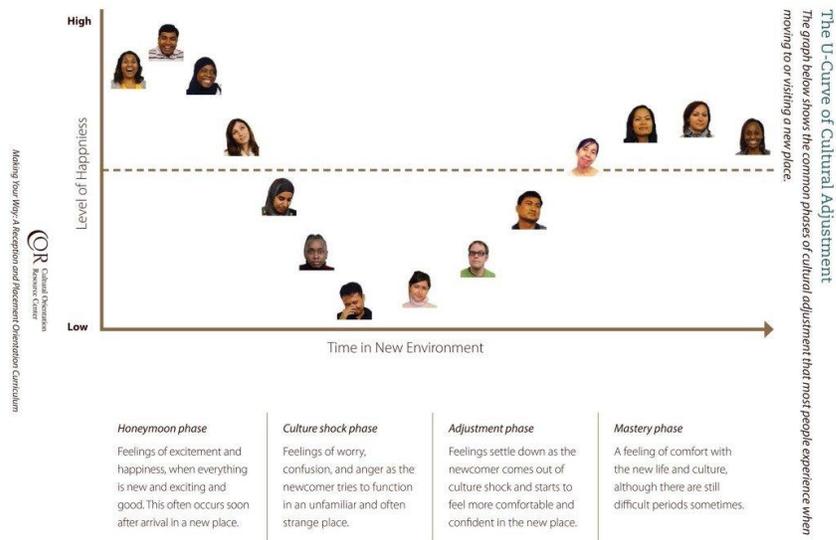
negatively affect the adjustment process, even to the point of re-traumatizing some clients. One participant felt that the push for economic self-sufficiency via employment is an unrealistic expectation and provided an example of a Syrian woman who was impacted by such policies:

The last thing they need is to be shoved into a job after a trauma. A woman from Syria had to go to work very quickly and I feel like her experience at work caused more trauma because of...not really understanding things and not having settled. And in our country we've become much more aware of mental health issues and trauma...but I wish that was something in our resettlement program that focused on that when they came in.

Case managers struggled to balance the policy expectation of rapid employment with meeting the emotional needs of their clients, and there was frequent mention of issues with cultural adjustment and needs for improved cultural orientation programs to set realistic expectations for refugees. One participant addressed the common notion of refugee adaptation as depicted by a “U-Curve” where the refugee enters the country with very high expectations and feels very positive, but has a sharp crash in emotional well-being as culture shock sets in, only to recover and ultimately find a new baseline of general well-being as seen in Figure 2.1 below.

**Figure 2.1**

*U-Curve of Cultural Adjustment*



Source: Refugee Center Online

It is important to note that this common model does not depict the experiences of all refugees. In fact, one respondent states that she used this as a demonstration with Syrian women during an empowerment group and was told this model is patently wrong after drawing the model on a whiteboard and encouraging the women to explain their experience: “She said ‘that’s not what my experience looked like at all.’ Because when she arrived, she was already down here [at the bottom] and she said ‘I kept going down and down and I wasn’t doing well.’” This insight has significant ramifications for case workers who may follow a cultural adjustment model and expect their clients to function in one way, while clients are actually functioning in another, which can then affect outcomes for the clients if the case workers do not recognize this discord.

Additionally, agency employees worried about how the Syrian refugees’ own culture places barriers on their clients once they arrive. Examples provided of this include

a male-dominated culture with conservative roles and expectations that women will remain in caregiving roles instead of going to work. They mentioned that the woman is often easily employable but the husband will stand in the way of this, feeling that it is inappropriate for his wife to be in the workforce. This puts the case worker in conflict with the husband as resettlement workers often try to prepare all able family members for employment, but the husband will push back on this. The respondent specifically denied a domestic violence component to this dynamic, noting that it was strictly a cultural expectation. They also identified the high cost of child care as a barrier to mothers becoming employed as well as multiple expectations of these women in various roles, and one worker commented specifically on what is commonly referred to as the “motherhood penalty” in feminist literature by stating: “We have a lot of uh, steep requirements of mothers” while continuing on to explain that these expectations create disparities which childless women do not experience.

The state employees had limited direct experience with Syrians in the state, although that is to be expected given the admission restrictions and their removed positions from direct practice. However, it was noted that no major concerns came through the local agencies, and these women are viewed as coming to the country with higher skill levels than other refugee populations. The employees noted that their (Syrian) high level of education and English skills are assets but also noted that this strength can be challenging when attempting to find jobs which meet their expectations and skill level upon arrival. Syrian families are perceived as having greater wealth than their non-Syrian counterparts, which could have been an underlying factor in why the Syrian women felt they were not receiving adequate financial support from their case workers. If the state

refugee office communicates this perception to case workers which then clouds their perspective of subjective needs, this is an area for improvement. The participants described this population as happy, resilient, ambitious, and successful: “I’ve heard that Syrian women are well-educated and have always been progressive. They’re very family oriented and want their kids to be successful...but they are open to be more part of the community. And all the Syrian women are spunky.” State workers had an overwhelmingly positive impression of Syrian women and expressed an interest in learning more about how they are adjusting to their new lives after resettlement.

### *Recommendations for Change*

*Employment.* Each of the respondents offered ways for refugee services to improve throughout the discussion. The Syrian women were focused on the mismatch of policy expectations with their values and needs. For example, both women wanted employment options, but the elder woman wanted to be able to work from home while the younger woman wanted the opportunity to explore options in the community. They expressed a strong desire to balance family caretaking obligations with financial contribution, which is contrary to the employment policies which push clients towards rapid full-time employment at any available position. These policies often overlook female clients and focus instead on male household members, who may be more available to work in manual labor without the cultural expectation of family caregiving.

Resettlement workers correlated employment expectations with trauma, and shared insight about ways that the rapid employment expectations exacerbated trauma in this population. Workers stressed that they wished it was possible to focus on mental

health needs either before or in conjunction with employment in order to ensure Syrian women could heal and cope with adjustment simultaneously. They also acknowledged that the U.S. job market does not always allow for employment in culturally appropriate ways, such as being able to work from home to cook or create wares.

State employees identified a strong work ethic as a reputational quality of Syrians overall and a desire to work as a strength of the women. They felt that this was a strength which kept their population as a whole from having issues as they don't encounter problematic complaints with Syrian clients from the resettlement agencies. This was attributed to the perceived Syrian preference to build new lives through hard work. However, they noted that there is at times frustration with the expectation to accept entry level jobs when their educational and career attainment levels are much higher than that upon entry, and felt that changes could target more appropriate jobs for their skill level.

*Education.* The younger woman with refugee status held a strong desire to increase her level of education. She specifically defined her idea of successful resettlement as being able to attend school to increase her level of skill in order to work at a job she feels comfortable with. Her response included a need for direct communication and self-advocacy, indicating the importance of being able to make decisions for herself. This is particularly salient as both women indicated that in Syria they are not allowed to seek further education past high school due to belonging to an ethnic minority (Kurdish). So for these women, access to education is viewed as a matter of social justice and equality.

Resettlement workers also highlighted this as an area of change, and specifically noted that younger Syrian women might have a stronger desire for increased education,

particularly if she were a mother with children. One respondent noted that Syrian women can be quite adamant about their expectations and another stated that sometimes, the desires of Syrian women contradict what the agency expects – i.e., they want to learn to drive, to go to work, and to attend school – and expressed concern that this may exacerbate mental health conditions if workers cannot identify and connect with these desires to improve education and lived experience. That worker stated: “they want to learn and to grow on their own, but sometimes I think they don’t have that opportunity because nobody has ever asked them those questions before.”

State employees view Syrians as “very educated” and believe that the mothers place high value on education for their children. The Syrian mothers in this study did indeed confirm this. This education also includes greater English capacity upon arrival which can assist with increased self-sufficiency. They felt that there needs to be greater education surrounding adjustment expectations though because the increased levels of education and English skills do not always translate into an immediate avenue for easier integration as many had hoped prior to arrival, or as many policies assume.

*Policy Change.* Another area both women focused in on for change was Medicaid policy. They felt that the 8 months of refugee Medicaid was too restrictive in order to adequately meet their health needs, and that this was a barrier to their overall goals including being able to seek employment. They collectively commented on a lack of understanding of the intricacies involved in navigating the larger social services system on their own, and a perceived unwillingness on behalf of the case workers to assist with this need. It is worth noting that all participants expressed a need for change within the Medicaid system.

Resettlement workers focused on the restrictive policies of work expectations. They felt that this is a harsh transition from the refugee women's previous lifestyle to suddenly adhere to strict 40-hour workweeks, even for family members. This expectation of rapid adjustment (often within 6 months) seems to exacerbate trauma and slow adjustment to the new culture (Bentley et al., 2012; Haffejee & East, 2016). Additionally, these jobs are often low wage and may be a barrier to receiving support such as mental health care which could foster healthy long-term adjustment. The resettlement workers were clear that they would shift the focus from rapid employment to trauma informed care if they were able to dictate policy.

Additionally, workers also had strong sentiments towards federal policy. They felt that the "Muslim Ban" or "extreme vetting procedures" were creating unnecessary restrictions which harm Syrians. This was succinctly expressed in one statement: "We are living in a time of unprecedented numbers of refugees. The United States is hurting its reputation - the extreme vetting procedures, the fact that this has effectively shut down migration from Syria - the United States can and should offer support." State workers also addressed restrictions on refugee admissions as a target for policy change. They believed that the significant reduction on refugee admissions under the Trump administration was harmful not only to Syrians but to the refugee program overall. And indeed, the literature confirms that the Trump administration decimated the national refugee resettlement program by removing the funding and infrastructure surrounding it (Kerwin, 2018). Across all cohorts of participants, the policy constraints of Medicaid and federal refugee limits were discussed as target for change to improve client experiences.

*Community Supports.* The elder Syrian woman was quick to acknowledge the usefulness of both faith-based agencies and other U.S. families in not only making them feel welcomed and accepted, but in increasing their understanding of the new community. While both women acknowledged the importance of having a local Arab-Muslim community for culturally appropriate support, there was also note of the importance of integration through natural acceptance of those around them in the broader community as well. In fact, while discussing this aspect the woman's whole demeanor changed so noticeably that the researcher commented on her appearance of happiness. She replied that telling this story makes her feel happy and reiterated her previous statement: "because they recognized us! They were very nice and we were happy to be included."

The woman went on to discuss her joy at being asked to attend a local church service with the friends she had made. This felt acceptable to her as she noted that in Syria, Christians and Muslims are without conflict and there is mutual respect of each other's faiths. Solidifying the importance to her of the acceptance of others in the new community, she stated: "We are not refugees anymore. We are Americans now." Thus, the importance of not only understanding but welcome and acceptance from the host community cannot be understated. The sense of belonging created by such integration solidifies their feeling of truly being in a new home.

While the Syrian women held very positive views of community supports, the resettlement workers did not feel the same way beyond the Arab-Muslim niche. They noted decreased support from community members and felt that much of the community support work falls to them now. One area of improvement recommended was to emulate a model based on Syrian women's empowerment programs created, which focus on new

skillsets to be able to enter the workforce with (such as plumbing) or builds upon existing skills (such as crafts and handiwork). From their perspective, there is nothing comparable here and having such a program would make a significant difference in the lives of Syrian women both in terms of increased economic self-sufficiency and community integration.

Another resettlement worker highlighted the contrast between Syrian culture, which is highly community-oriented, and U.S. culture, which is very individualistic. A recommendation was to create a mentorship model designed to help these women adjust to the new expectations of U.S. society while also providing vocational training or ongoing education. The current strength of the local community is that it feels very safe to those who have recently escaped war, and while that is an important consideration for families it is equally important to consider psychosocial safety as well. For this reason, resettlement workers felt that it is imperative to build mental health supports into community resources for Syrian women in order to help facilitate healing from traumatic experiences.

State agency workers felt that educating the broader community would be of benefit to improve issues as the general public holds misconceptions about refugees overall. One respondent stated: “There are a number [of people] in our country right now who are coming from a place I’ve never seen before. They’re not even open to listening.” A common misconception heard within the community is that refugees do not pay taxes, which creates feelings of frustration based on fallacious information. Therefore, state workers felt that creating outreach and education within the community to “tell the real story” would establish a more welcoming environment overall.

Finally, state workers felt that building stronger partnerships with faith-based agencies and local schools would help to improve community supports. This was viewed as a way not only to build community connections but also to fill in the funding gaps created by federal policy restrictions by increasing avenues for community donations. Particularly with the perceived focus on education in Syrian communities, the respondents believed that starting partnerships at the primary school level would ultimately lead to improved college admissions and academic outcomes for Syrian children who have resettled in the U.S.

### *Discussion*

The Syrian women were eager to engage with available services and open to speaking directly with case workers and other public officials, which is contradictory to what some of the literature suggests. One study notes that refugees are frequently afraid of contact with government officials or other authorities as a result of negative experiences they have had along their journey (Carter, 2015), while another states that Syrians may be mistrustful of resettlement workers due to trauma and exploitation experienced by those who were supposed to assist along their journey (Yasmine & Moughalihan, 2016). However, this was not the case for these women and thus providing more direct access to supports and opportunities in a manner which allows Syrian women to self-determine their amount of interaction may be beneficial.

Additionally, the Syrian participants reported that there was no racism in the United States, but studies show that that post-9/11 U.S. culture is hostile to Arabs and Muslims (Fadda-Conrey, 2011; Azam, 2018) and the host country may be racist, sexist, and classist - which impacts female refugees harshly (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). Of

note is the fact that they did not address mental health concerns, but did mention wanting to work in connection with feeling bored, and the literature states that Syrian mothers may identify depression as boredom (Ahmed, 2017), so this is an aspect for those interacting with this population to be aware of. It would be beneficial for local agencies to assist with identifying ways these women can work from home - perhaps by helping with small startup business such as childcare, cooking, or sewing – while also combining psychoeducation on common mental health concerns simultaneously.

Several aspects of this study align with published literature. For instance, a local staff member spoke of the acculturation model which is widely used to explain the timeline for a refugee to adjust to a new society (Refugee Center Online, n.d.). They mentioned correctly that this model can be inaccurate, and it varies based on the gender and culture of the client in question, and what experiences may have been had along the journey. This is confirmed in research which indicates that there are conflicting views on this U-curve model, although there tends to be some merit to it overall (Markovitsky, 2008). Therefore, it is important for resettlement workers to understand that this common representation of adjustment may not be accurate, and to take an approach which encourages each refugee client to articulate their own experience compared to the U-curve model in order to create accurate expectations and understanding in both the worker and the client respectively.

Furthermore, the intense focus on employment is also prominent in the literature – both because it is a current measure of refugee success and because refugees report that this is not an accurate measure of success. Successful resettlement measures focus predominantly on employment – often rapid employment accepted at low wages – in

order to align with the priorities of government funded goals. However, this focus on rapid, low wage employment may stifle actual economic growth for refugees by placing them on a path with limited upward mobility, leaving them in precarious financial positions indefinitely (Young, 2020). Some studies note that the focus on rapid employment may delay healing of traumatic experiences and further complicate the lives of refugee women post-resettlement.

Gendered roles tend to be more entrenched in refugee populations and thus refugee women have greater barriers to robust and meaningful employment. Unfortunately, U.S. social services exacerbate the gendered expectations and may worsen economic problems for refugee women with rapid work initiatives requiring them to accept low paying jobs (Campion, 2018). Both state workers and case managers demonstrated significant awareness of this issue and focused on other indicators of success on individual levels as well. It is important to understand each refugee woman in their unique cultural, social, and personal expectations when creating a framework for refugee employment models that are also inclusive in understanding trauma and health needs, and this is an area which still requires improvement.

The ramifications of policy decisions are well documented in the literature as well. By 2018, 13.6 million people had been displaced from Syria and 5 million had left the country as refugees, and the United States had only taken in 4,000 Syrian refugees by this time. United States policy tends to fluctuate based on political trends and social opinions, and Donald Trump's call for closing borders to Muslims has caused many U.S. governors to oppose Syrian resettlement in their state (Diven, 2018). That zero Syrian refugees have arrived in North Carolina since 2018 is concerning and the participants

expressed a significant level of distress regarding the federal policy changes and the impact this is having on the resettlement program as a whole.

There was distinct indication for matricentric (mother-specific) policies from all respondents. The Syrian women highlighted their motherly duties as paramount but expressed strong desires to work and learn. Resettlement workers felt that policy requirements created heavy burdens and barriers for mothers and recognized that their needs may be different from single women. State workers identified the Syrian women's family-centeredness as a strength as well. Therefore, policy makers should be mindful to create matricentric supports throughout all levels of resettlement practice as a matter of social justice and cultural appropriateness.

From a transnational feminist perspective, the insight provided by the Syrian mothers who participated in this study is valuable to informing policy change. The concept of traditional borders of nation-states and rigid expectations of behavior within them is much more fluid for transnational feminists, and women with refugee status should be allowed to develop identities encompassing qualities from both their native country and their host country (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). Indeed, the women identified this as a need – the desire to maintain their Syrian values while also adapting to U.S. employment and educational standards within their own timeframes and comfort levels. The resettlement workers at both levels indicated that they were not only supportive of this need, but felt that it was imperative to ensure enough flexibility in policy and practice for a blending of cultural values to exist. This marks an openness in practice which is currently not present in policy and is therefore an area to focus on improving.

### *Visual Representations*

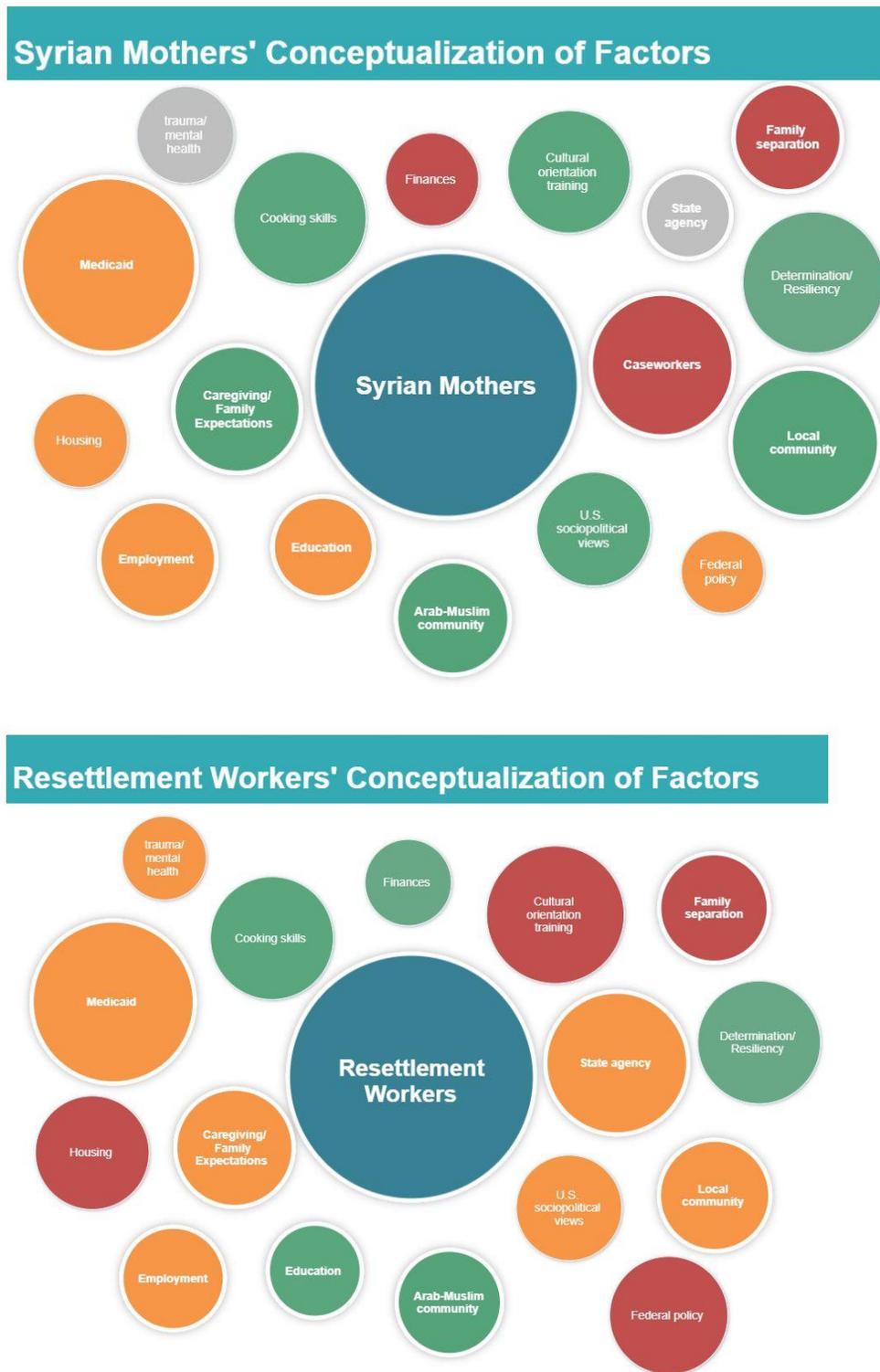
When viewing the responses of participants in a visual representation, it becomes easier to see the differences and similarities in each groups' understanding of issues. In the depictions below, the participants' responses are color coded by perceived relationship strain (green = positive, orange = conflicted, red = stressful) and sized by perceived impact on the lives of Syrian women. Any bubbles in the chart which are grey indicates that the response was addressed by another cohort, but not directly addressed by the cohort listed. All respondents agreed that Medicaid, housing, and employment were at least somewhat difficult for the Syrian women. Additionally, all respondents agree that family separation is extremely stressful and federal policy contributes to strain. All respondents agree that Syrian women are resilient, have excellent cooking skills which are personal strengths, and that the local Arab-Muslim community is supportive. Resiliency is particularly important to focus on to understand more about the underlying mechanisms therein, including family and cultural strengths. When combined with an understanding of the sociopolitical context of the area in which a refugee has been resettled, this can ensure that resettlement practice is truly focused on human rights (Drolet et. al, 2018).

However, there are areas in which the Syrian women view things differently than those who are working with them. For example, the Syrian respondents felt that cultural orientation was accurate and beneficial whereas the resettlement and state workers felt that this training sets inaccurate perceptions and skews expectations. This is particularly stressful for the resettlement workers who engage directly with the Syrian women. Additionally, the Syrian women view their commitment to homemaking as a strength

whereas others view it as a barrier to employment. The workers feel that Syrians have higher levels of finances and education, an area in which the women feel strained. It is important to note that perceived financial discrepancies have been cited as significant factors contributing to post-resettlement stress amongst Syrian refugees (Malm et al., 2020). Furthermore, trauma and mental health needs were highlighted only by the resettlement workers – those who are working closely with the Syrian women. See Figure 2.2 for visual comparisons.

**Figure 2.2**

*Visual Conceptualization of Factors*



## State Workers' Conceptualization of Factors



### *Strengths and Limitations*

This study holds several strengths. Most notably, to my knowledge, there are refugee focused studies which include perspectives of case workers or resettlement workers and clients, but not which triangulate all three. This triangulation allows for a novel conceptualization of factors and a study of strengths and weaknesses along the resettlement hierarchy. Thus, this allows for a foundation on which to build more robust studies. There are limited U.S.-based studies on Syrians with refugee status due to the extreme restrictions from the government, and this study therefore acts as a testament to those in this nation and is an indication of care and concern for their welfare despite political strife. Furthermore, participants appeared eager to provide their viewpoints, and several interesting insights came out of discussions. The mothers were very clear on their preferences and this provides insight into potential improvements in resettlement

practices. Overall, this study provides valuable information which could be a beneficial piece of the growing body of research pertaining to Syrian women with refugee status.

There are also several limitations to this study. Most notably, due to the small sample size the results are not generalizable, even to other Syrian women with refugee status in the same local area. Since the women were resettled together, their experiences were similar and thus outcomes may have been different if women from separate households were interviewed instead. The semi-structured interviews did not involve questions about trauma specifically, and although resettlement workers alluded to trauma experienced by Syrian women overall, that aspect would need to be addressed directly in future research. Finally, these interviews provide only a snapshot of perspectives during the time they were conducted, and attitudes of participants may have changed since then. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution and used only as a springboard for future research involving larger cohorts.

### *Implications*

There are still several potentially important takeaways from this study. The Syrian women expressed feeling happy overall with their new lives in the United States – and since they were not hesitant to express dissatisfaction about particular issues with case workers, there is no reason to believe that this was not their genuine feelings.

Additionally, their desire to work in employment which meets their needs as caregivers while simultaneously being able to contribute to finances is important for resettlement workers, policy setters, and community employers to understand. While only the perspectives of two women were represented here, their experiences and opinions matter and provide valuable perspective.

The women were unable to identify particular coping mechanisms which helped adjust post-resettlement, and this is another area of focus for future research. Additionally, these women viewed themselves as equal to the men in their household and did not differentiate between their experiences or needs when asked to elaborate on this. There are several potential explanations for this. It is possible that there was a lack of comfort with disclosing personal information as the researcher may not have established full trust, that the women do not have a frame of reference for placing their needs and experiences separate from their male family members, or simply that they feel they are equal in that context. Further inquiry should be made with deeper qualitative interviews to learn more about their perspectives with regards to this. Additionally, other researchers note that it is necessary to continue exploring refugees' perceptions of resettlement to ensure that the supports and policies in place are culturally appropriate for the populations being served (Drolet et. al, 2018).

Since every participant noted frustration with the Medicaid process and disconnection amongst the chain of communication as well, this is another area to inquire about in future research. It would be beneficial to determine ways this process can be streamlined to improve experiences and outcomes for all involved. Indeed, lack of healthcare access and subsequent issues are a significant concern as one in three refugees are currently resettled in states which do not offer Medicaid expansion (Agrawal & Venkatesh, 2016), including the state in which this study was conducted. Housing strain was another area identified by all participants, and it could be beneficial to create new pathways in the community for affordable housing. This aligns with the viewpoint of state workers that public education can make a difference in reception for these women

by increasing a sense of welcome in the local area. Indeed, previous research notes that community attitudes towards Syrians have worsened in part because of media portrayal of Muslims which depicts them as terrorists unjustly (Barkdull et al., 2011; Alsultany, 2013), and has been particularly harmful for foreign born Muslim women (Alsultany, 2013). Therefore, it would be important to counter these narratives with the “real story” as workers recommended.

The conceptualization of factors visualization models created for each set of participants may be useful to researchers in the future as a place to consider dynamics and areas to inquire about for future studies. This provides a snapshot of participant perceptions and is useful in highlighting both similarities and differences in each cohort’s understanding of issues affecting Syrian women with refugee status. It would be beneficial to recreate these models with larger studies in the future. The conceptualization of these issues are particularly relevant to the field of social work given the newly released 2021 Federal Social Policy Issues, which include robust measures for refugee resettlement and an end to policies such as the “Muslim Ban” which cause distress (NASW, 2021). Furthermore, as social workers are increasingly connected with international issues due to globalization, and particularly with refugees as they are frequently marginalized and vulnerable (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010), it is imperative that social workers understanding the dynamics discussed herein.

Additional insight is necessary to determine the effect of role strain along the chain of communication, especially since all participants identified this as a concern. Other areas of focus include determining the level of policy stress on agency workers and ways this impacts refugee clients, and further focus on the needs of Syrian women post-

resettlement. Staff workers across all levels of the resettlement journey demonstrate significant levels of competency and skill and bring a wide range of proficiencies to their careers. Much of their insight aligns with already existing literature, but some of their knowledge indicates an understanding of individual refugee clients' needs which are only beginning to emerge in the literature. This includes a focus on the need for trauma-informed policies and moving away from an employment model of determining successful resettlement. It is important to create reciprocal communication between researchers and practice in order to reduce gaps in knowledge.

However, one obvious blind spot stands out: each interviewee addressed wanting information which is easily attainable. State and local refugee employees discussed a desire to know more about how Syrian women were adjusting to their new lives and if they had any unmet needs, and the Syrian women indicated a desire to know how to reach out to the employees at all levels to be able to ask questions when needed. Clearly, there is an opportunity to create dialogue here which is not being met at this time. Given the context of the information revealed in this small pilot study, it could be feasible to create a Syrian women's coalition designed to achieve multiple goals: to serve as a voice for the community to inform the state and local agencies of their needs, to serve as a leadership model in the community for communicating policies and processes back to the community, and to serve as an empowerment and support model for the women engaged in the group. This would also strengthen the refugee program to prepare for the arrival of more Syrians if and when the federal policies change again.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Perceptions of North Carolina Social Workers Towards Syrian Women with Refugee Status

#### Abstract

The field of social work is uniquely poised to address issues pertaining to refugees due to its intervention focus at multiple levels within society, understanding of intersectionality, anti-oppressive stance, and commitment to cultural humility. Many social workers are both unaware of their client's refugee status and unprepared to meet their client's opportunities for change. This is particularly problematic for the newer wave of Syrians in the United States who are here during a time when anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiments are on the rise. While there is research on the perspectives of Syrians regarding their refugee journey, there is a paucity of research and literature on the perceptions of social workers towards and willingness to welcome Syrians into their practice. Some studies indicate that Syrian women are more easily welcomed, though, than their male counterparts. Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to understand more about the perceptions of social workers in North Carolina towards Syrian women with refugee status.

*Keywords: social work, Syrian refugees, Islamophobia, anti-oppressive, cultural competency*

## *Introduction*

Social workers are obligated to welcome Syrian refugees not only because of professional ethics but because of professional directions supporting such action. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) released a statement specific to the needs of Syrian refugees in 2015 calling on social work professionals to support those who have been displaced, advocate for their welcome, and provide supportive services (NASW, 2015). The opportunities to work with Syrian refugees should be at the forefront of the profession at this time. There is currently limited information on the perceptions of social workers towards Syrian refugee women. Additionally, there have not been new Syrian refugee arrivals in the United States since 2017 due to the controversial policy known as the “Muslim Ban”, although as one Congressional testimony previously noted, “when the Syrians come we need to have a network ready” (Hanley, 2015, p. 21).

For those in North Carolina, a state amongst the top 10 states where Syrians were resettled when previously allowed into the U.S. (Radford & Conner, 2016) and therefore in the locations most likely for resettlement in the future, it is imperative to prepare for arrival once again given the recent presidential administration change. Knowledge about North Carolina social workers’ attitudes towards Syrian refugee women will help the state refugee office to be able to create trainings and information in order to prepare for when these women are once again allowed to resettle here.

## *Literature Review*

Social workers have a long-standing history of supporting and working with refugees. From the beginnings of the profession, immigrants and those who would be classified as refugees by today’s standards were at the heart of service provision. In fact,

Jane Addams' early work at Hull House in Chicago and her radically progressive stance on welcoming all immigrants would ultimately influence refugee reception in the United States (Lissak, 1983). She felt that her work with this population held the potential to transform society and act as a peacekeeping measure simultaneously (Ortiz, 2016).

The term refugee has roots in the WWII era, and after that, the current definition of refugee was not solidified until the year 2000. Social Work emerged as a profession during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a significant influx of immigrants arriving in the U.S simultaneously. As a result, many of those served by social workers were, in fact, refugees by today's standards (Park, 2008). The Settlement House Movement started by Jane Addams was in part founded to assist those in the working class who were primarily immigrants from Eastern Europe. The perspectives of these early social workers greatly shaped the policies towards those seeking refuge at the time (Lissak, 1983). Grace and Edith Abbott, for example, defended these individuals against those who claimed they were causing problems in society (Park, 2008) while Jane Addams felt that the impressiveness of this population was their willingness to assimilate into U.S. society and adapt to changing circumstances in life (Ortiz, 2016).

Through early discussion about refugees, social workers contributed to the narrative of deserving vs. underserving refugees and contributed to some of the biases against them which are still present today despite their intentions to advocate for and promote the welfare of refugees. It is incumbent upon social work practitioners to be ever-mindful of the ways their work may affect outcomes for refugees at all times (Park, 2008). While earlier social work models focused on ensuring that incoming refugees assimilated into the dominant U.S. culture, a more recent focus is on integration instead

(Nash et al., 2006). This focus on integration means that social work practitioners must understand how to combine the strengths of each individual refugee with those of the dominant society to ensure a safe and successful start to a new life. Early social work, however, focused on the needs of White refugees and ensuring conformity with dominant society (Jayshree & Reich, 2018). Today there is a shifting perspective in the profession as the refugee population and political landscape has rapidly changed.

As social work is increasingly globalized, many practitioners feel that they have not received adequate training to be able to effectively intervene with refugees (Nash et al., 2006). As globalization increases, social workers in local communities are having to adjust their practice to meet needs which often have international components (Lyons, 2006). Today, social workers encounter refugees frequently and often without realizing their refugee status and must be well trained in issues related to global communities (Diaconu et al., 2018). Social workers require specialized knowledge and cultural competency regarding the needs of refugees at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice (Nash et al., 2006).

The social work profession requires critical self-analysis with regards to issues of power and oppression. The commitment to human rights must be assessed throughout all levels and fields of social work practice. In doing so, the social worker becomes the unit of measurement and thus individual social workers' perspectives are important within a broader discussion of human rights within the field. Understanding the perspectives of individuals as they relate to human rights and anti-racist practices within policy and procedures can create a critical consciousness which elevates awareness of social justice issues within a disenfranchised group. It is important, however, to inquire not only about

individual perspectives but also institutional or agency ones as well (Rozas & Garran, 2016).

The United States has been touted as a leader in the world with regards to refugee resettlement, but it has been increasingly criticized for lack of adequate support as refugees integrate into their new communities. This is particularly true at the local level (Capps, et al., 2015). It is essential to understand the local context for refugee issues, including those at the state level. Due to social work's unique focus as a profession on social justice, and the understanding of issues at the micro/macro/mezzo levels, social workers are set to be emerging leaders in refugee resettlement practice. Social workers need to be aware of the intersections of structural racism, policy, historical oppression, health care, immigration laws, housing, advocacy, and more in order to effectively practice with refugees (Drolet, et al., 2018).

This is especially true when working with Syrian refugees, due to the impact upon them of sociopolitical increases in anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States recently (McCleary & Chaudry, 2017). The U.S. has experienced increasing anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments for several decades. There have been a series of issues throughout the years which created anti-Arab views: most notably, the Six Day War in 1967, the oil embargo of 1973, the first Gulf War, and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. However, the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and other events that day (9/11) was the turning point for already existing xenophobic and prejudicial views against Arabs in the U.S. at that time. Policies instituted by the U.S. government following 9/11 only worsened the perception of Arabs and Muslims in the public eye (Fadda-Conrey, 2011). Most recently, the 2016 presidential debates brought

Syrian migration to the forefront of U.S. thought (Yigit & Tatch, 2017) and the transition to the Trump administration brought even more anti-Islamic rhetoric which caused further issues for Arab and Muslim refugees entering the country, including Syrians (McCleary & Chaudry, 2017).

Research indicates that due to the sociopolitical effects of anti-Muslim and Islamophobic perspectives, Muslim refugees face more difficulty resettling in the U.S. than their non-Muslim counterparts. Since the majority of Syrian refugees are Muslim, this is particularly relevant to this population (McCleary & Chaudry, 2017). By 2017, nearly one-third of all refugees worldwide originated from Syria (Adida et al., 2019). This new wave of Syrian refugees is not the first to enter the United States. Syrians began arriving to the U.S. while fleeing violence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. More began emigrating here after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, but this latest wave of Syrian refugees increased Syrian migration to the United States by over 40% (Yigit & Tatch, 2017).

President Donald Trump's executive order of January 2017 effectively banned those from seven Muslim majority nations (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen) from entering the United States, suspended the overall refugee program temporarily, and disallowed Syrian refugees indefinitely. Because of this, the order was colloquially called the "Muslim Ban". This was part of a larger attempt by the administration to portray not only Muslims and refugees, but all foreigners and minorities as threats to the security of the United States (Al-Samman, 2017). While these sentiments make their way into legislation which often negatively affects Syrian refugees, there is limited effort in resettlement policies to push back on harmful perceptions of this group

(McClearly & Chaudry, 2017). Social workers have the opportunity to make changes in policy, practice, research, and academia regarding refugee resettlement. The field of social work itself is poised to be at the center of correcting injustices in refugee welfare (Rine, 2018). Social workers engaging with Syrian refugees are well-positioned to bring positive change, but there is a need to understand and address potential anti-refugee and/or racist sentiments towards Muslim refugees in the field of social work (McClearly & Chaudry, 2017).

Social workers located in what is known as the Global North (which includes the United States) tend to hold disproportionate power compared to those elsewhere in the world (Deepak, 2012). A key responsibility of social workers is to advocate for the rights of refugees, especially in this current climate. Despite increasing interest in the welfare of refugee populations within the field of social work, ongoing advocacy is needed to improve education on their unique needs and the importance of social work interventions with refugees. One way to accomplish this is to ensure an understanding of social work practice intersection with refugees. However, one key gap in research is an understanding of the extent of involvement of social workers in refugee issues including ways in which they are providing support and areas of opportunities for additional improvement (Popescu & Libal, 2018). It is crucial to critically assess the perspectives of social workers across all fields of practice here to understand their views and perspectives of Syrian women with refugee status.

### *Methodology*

This study is a cross-sectional study of social workers practicing in North Carolina. Potential participants were identified through online outreach, by community

word of mouth or snowball sampling, and by email blasts from agencies. Once identified, potential participants were invited to complete an online survey at their own convenience. During this time, participants were informed of confidentiality statements and explained of the right to opt out at any time by exiting the survey. Participants were able to skip any questions which they chose not to answer. Additionally, participants' personal information was not collected in order to maintain anonymity. Participants had the option of providing an email address if they chose to enter a raffle to win a gift card.

Qualtrics was utilized to create and disseminate the survey, and analysis was completed through a combination of SPSS and Intellectus Statistics. In order to assess for potential selection bias, there is a question embedded in the survey inquiring about the respondent's interest in the Syrian refugee women population. Participant quotes from the open-ended questions were used to support data and highlight perspectives of respondents, with any identifying information removed. Questions are designed specifically for this dissertation research and results will be provided to the state refugee agency to assist with understanding of social worker perceptions for future refugee resettlement needs.

The research questions (RQ) for this study were as follows:

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of North Carolina social workers towards Syrian women with refugee status?
2. How do North Carolina social workers describe their perceived efficacy of their field of practice regarding work with Syrian women with refugee status?
3. Are North Carolina social workers receptive to receiving additional training in order to meet the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?

Several variables were analyzed to answer these questions. Descriptive statistics were used to gain an overall understanding of the respondent pool. These demographics included age, gender, level of social work attainment, region of the state in which the social worker practices, field of practice, faith, and political affiliation. The categories of field and faith were recoded into more concise categories as there were not enough participants in each original category to complete analysis beyond descriptives. Summary statistics were completed to gain insight into the range of years in practice and number of years in practice with Syrians directly.

To answer RQ#1, the variable “What is your overall perception of Syrian women with refugee status?” was measure by Likert scale and analyzed in a Kruskal-Wallis test to determine if there were significant differences in perception based on the variables age, perception of bias against Syrians, faith, field, gender, political affiliation, and region of practice. Participants were also asked to select adjectives which they felt describe Syrian women with refugee status, and to indicate their perception of bias against this population in the community as well as their perspective of the “Muslim Ban”. Perception of bias was measured on a yes/no binary while perspective of “Muslim Ban” had three response options of perceived fairness and one response options of not having knowledge of the policy. Additionally, participants were asked to rate their level of supportiveness of policies created specifically for Syrian women and also for Syrian mothers on a Likert scale. Further understanding of the responses pertaining to bias came from participant quotes and stratification by faith and gender and perception of the “Muslim Ban”.

To answer RQ#2, the variables of confidence in agency’s ability to meet the needs of Syrian women - which was further broken down by field of practice - and level of

cultural competency were measured. Both variables were measured in Likert scale responses. Additionally, participants were asked to elaborate upon where they received their cultural competency knowledge.

To answer RQ#3, the variables of interest level in working with Syrian women and interest level in receiving training on the needs of Syrian women were analyzed. Both variables were measures in Likert scale responses. These were further analyzed by faith, field, political affiliation, and region to determine differences within these categories. Finally, a new variable called “openness” was created from several other variable in order to understand more about factors which contribute to social worker’s willingness to engage with and learn about Syrian women with refugee status. Further explanation on these analyses is provided below.

### *Subject Selection and Recruitment*

The sampling frame for the study included social workers practicing in the state of North Carolina. Participants were chosen from a sample of convenience and recruited through direct outreach and snowball sampling. Contacts at local and statewide agencies including NASW-NC were utilized to help recruit respondents by sending out email blasts with the link to the survey invitation. Additionally, recruitment came from survey links shared through local colleges and online spaces including Facebook. Participants were required to be over the age of 18 to be able to consent under applicable laws, must have at least one social work degree, and be currently employed. It was anticipated that 300 participants would be recruited for this study to complete the survey; 235 individuals participated in total. Participants were informed of the study procedures and received a consent statement included at the beginning of the survey to constitute consent in order to

avoid collecting any personal data. Incomplete surveys were counted as withdrawals and were not used in aggregate data except to note the number of incomplete responses.

Inclusion criteria were social workers practicing in North Carolina, those with at least one social work degree, and individuals over the age of 18. Exclusion criteria were social workers practicing outside of North Carolina, those who do not have any social work degrees, and individuals under the age of 18. The survey received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Baylor University and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

The survey was distributed through social media including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. It was distributed through listservs at NASW-NC and the National Association of Christian Social Workers (NACSW). Outreach was provided through email to all 25 schools of social work in North Carolina, all county social services and public health departments at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) in North Carolina, every refugee resettlement agency and refugee-affiliated agency in the state, all Islamic associations and schools, and the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW). Several DHHS contacts confirmed that the survey would be distributed, although one county responded that they do not hire social workers on their staff. Likewise, there was significant feedback from refugee resettlement agencies that there were no social workers on staff. There was no response from NABSW or the Islamic Associations.

## Data Analysis

### Participant Demographics

There were 235 initial total survey respondents. Twenty-three respondents were removed due to not having a social work degree, and an additional 31 were removed for not completing a significant amount of the survey, leaving a total of 181 responses for analysis. The majority of respondents were LCSWs (86), followed by MSWs (47), BSWs (30), LCSW-As (11), MSW students (4), PhDs (2), and CMSWs<sup>1</sup> (1).

Due to the sample size, the faith and field of practice categories were recoded into fewer groups for analysis purposes. The most frequently observed category of gender was Female ( $n = 152, 84\%$ ). The most frequently observed category of age was 25-34 ( $n = 67, 37\%$ ). The most frequently observed category of field was Mental Health ( $n = 70, 43.7\%$ )<sup>1</sup>. The most frequently observed category of region was Triangle ( $n = 79, 43.7\%$ ). The most frequently observed category of faith was Christian ( $n = 97, 54.7\%$ )<sup>2</sup>. The most frequently observed category of political affiliation was Democrat ( $n = 103, 56.9\%$ ). See Table 3.1 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.1**

*Frequency Table for Nominal and Ordinal Variables*

Variable	Number ( $n$ )	Percentage (%)
Level of social work credential		
BSW	30	16.57
MSW	47	25.97
LCSW/LISW/LMSW	86	47.51
PhD	2	1.10
Other	16	8.84

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<sup>1</sup> Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Masters of Social Work, Bachelors of Social Work, Licensed Clinical Social Worker Associate, Masters of Social Work student, Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work, Certified Master Social Worker.

Missing	0	0.00
gender		
Male	11	6.08
Female	152	83.98
Non-binary	3	1.66
Missing	15	8.29
age		
18-24	8	4.42
25-34	67	37.02
35-44	48	26.52
45-54	25	13.81
55+	17	9.39
Missing	16	8.84
region		
Western	13	7.18
Southwestern	12	6.63
Triad	20	11.05
Triangle	79	43.65
Southeastern	19	10.50
Eastern	22	12.15
Missing	16	8.84
field		
Education	25	13.81
Community/Social Services	41	22.65
Medical	28	15.47
Mental Health/Substance Use	79	43.65
Other <sup>1</sup>	8	4.42
Missing	0	0.00
faith		
Agnostic/Atheist	34	18.78
Christian	99	54.70
Jewish	10	5.52
Other <sup>2</sup>	22	12.15
Missing	16	8.84
political		
Democrat	103	56.91
Republican	5	2.76
Independent	42	23.20
Other	15	8.29
Missing	16	8.84

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<sup>1</sup>“Other” included four refugee resettlement workers; <sup>2</sup>“Other” included one Muslim participant.

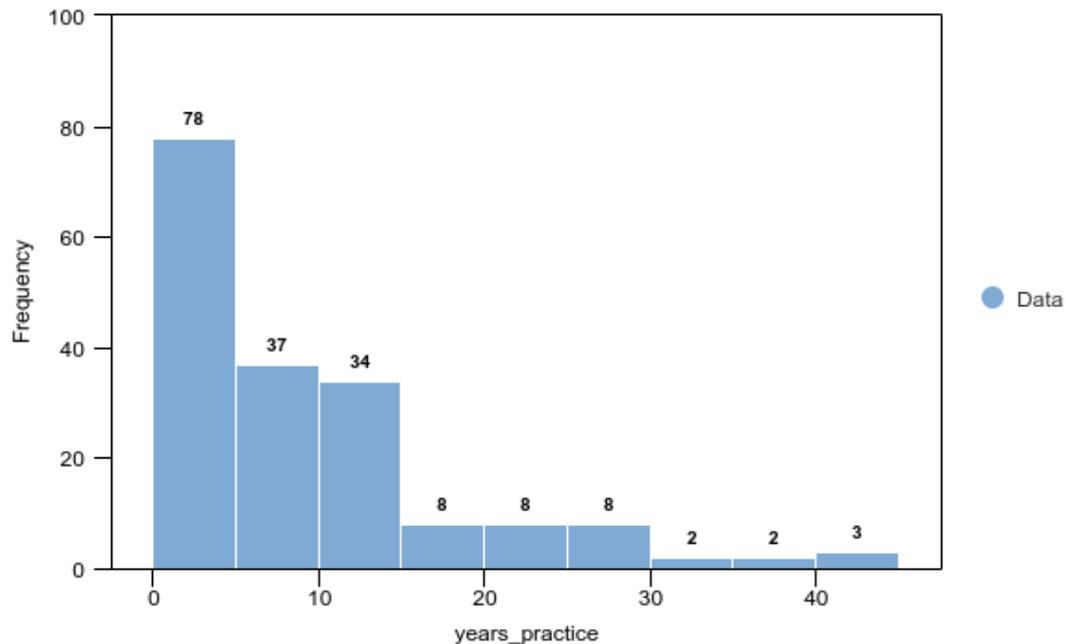
The observations for years in practice ranged from 0-45 years and had an average of 9.93 years ( $SD = 9.34$ ,  $SE_M = 0.70$ ,  $Min = 0.00$ ,  $Max = 45.00$ ,  $Skewness = 1.62$ ,  $Kurtosis = 2.49$ ). The observations for years working with Syrian women with refugee status ranged from 0-13 years with an average of 0.29 years ( $SD = 1.33$ ,  $SE_M = 0.10$ ,  $Min = 0.00$ ,  $Max = 13.00$ ,  $Skewness = 7.31$ ,  $Kurtosis = 59.94$ ). When the skewness is greater than 2 in absolute value, the variable is asymmetrical about its mean. When the kurtosis is greater than or equal to 3, then the variable's distribution is markedly different than a normal distribution in its tendency to produce outliers (Westfall & Henning, 2013). The summary statistics can be found in Table 3.2. In both categories, there were significant outliers, as visualized in the histograms in Figures 3.1 and 3.2.

**Table 3.2**  
*Summary Statistics for Interval and Ratio Variables*

Variable	$M$	$SD$	$n$	$SE_M$	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Years in practice	9.93	9.34	180	0.70	0.00	45.00	1.62	2.49
Years of Syrian experience	0.29	1.33	181	0.10	0.00	13.00	7.31	59.94

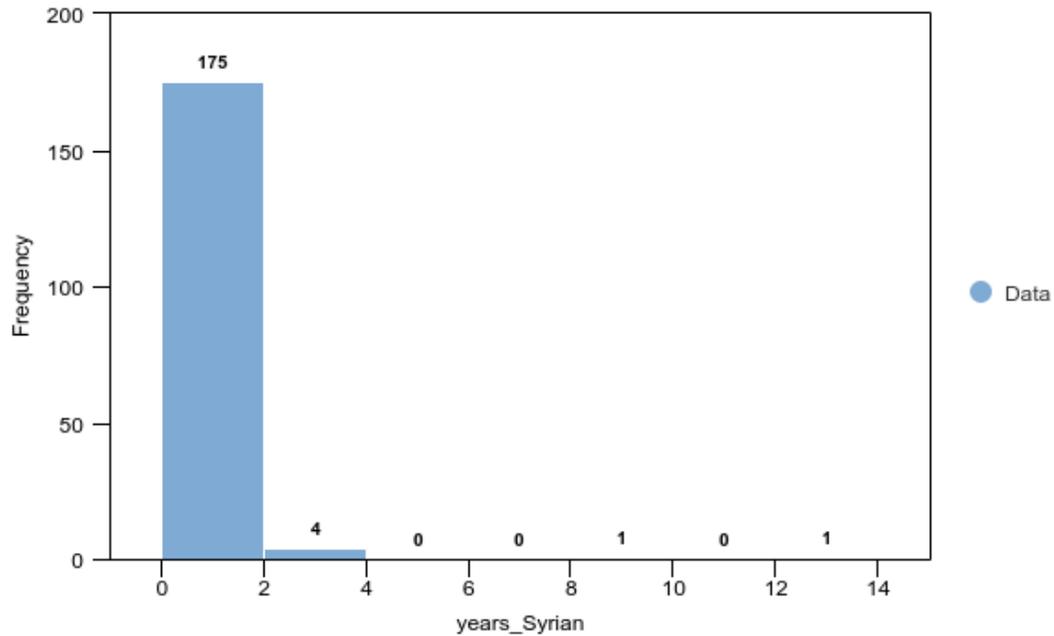
**Figure 3.1**

*Years in Practice as a Social Worker*



**Figure 3.2**

*Years of experience with Syrian women with refugee s*



*Note:* Frequency refers to number of participants in each response category.

### *Research Questions*

Research Question #1: What are the attitudes and perceptions of North Carolina social workers towards Syrian women with refugee status?

Participants held an overwhelmingly positive view of Syrian women with refugee status. The majority of respondents (59.9%) described their perceptions as slightly positive or very positive. Only a small fraction of respondents (1.2%) identified a slightly negative perception. No respondents selected the very negative perception as an option.

See Table 3.3 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.3***Overall Perception of Syrian Women with Refugee Status*

Response category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
very negative	0	0.00
slightly negative	2	1.10
neither positive nor negative	65	35.91
slightly positive	26	14.36
very positive	74	40.88
Missing	14	7.73

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

A Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test was conducted to assess if there were significant differences in perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status between the levels of age, bias, faith, field, gender, political affiliation, and region. The Kruskal-Wallis test is a non-parametric alternative to the one-way ANOVA and does not share the ANOVA's distributional assumptions (Conover & Iman, 1981).

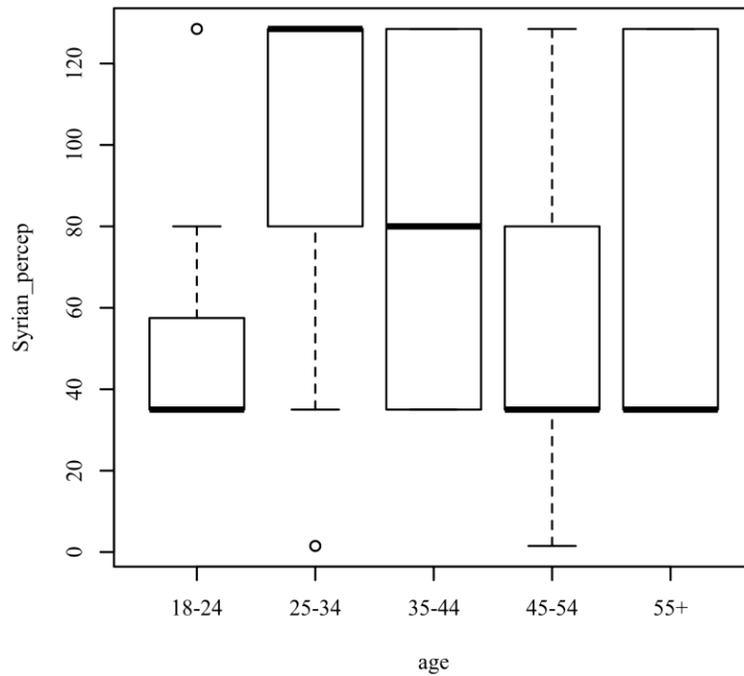
The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for age were significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(4) = 19.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that the mean rank of respondents perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status differed significantly by age group. Table 3.4 presents the results of the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test. Figure 3.3 presents boxplots of the ranked values of Syrian Perception by the levels of age.

**Table 3.4***Kruskal-Wallis Rank Sum Test for Syrian Perception by age*

Level	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	df	p
18-24	52.31	19.24	4	< .001
25-34	97.14			
35-44	83.48			
45-54	59.70			
55+	70.65			

**Figure 3.3**

*Ranked Values of Syrian Perception by age*



**Post-hoc.** Pairwise comparisons were examined between each level of age. The results of the multiple comparisons indicated significant differences based on an alpha value of 0.05 between 25-34-45-54. Table 3.5 presents the results of the pairwise comparisons.

**Table 3.5***Pairwise Comparisons for the Mean Ranks of Syrian Perception by Age*

Comparison	Observed Difference	Critical Difference
18-24-25-34	44.82	49.90
18-24-35-44	31.17	50.90
18-24-45-54	7.39	54.15
18-24-55+	18.33	57.15
25-34-35-44	13.66	25.29
25-34-45-54	37.44	31.30
25-34-55+	26.49	36.25
35-44-45-54	23.78	32.88
35-44-55+	12.83	37.62
45-54-55+	10.95	41.90

*Note.* Observed Differences > Critical Differences indicate significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

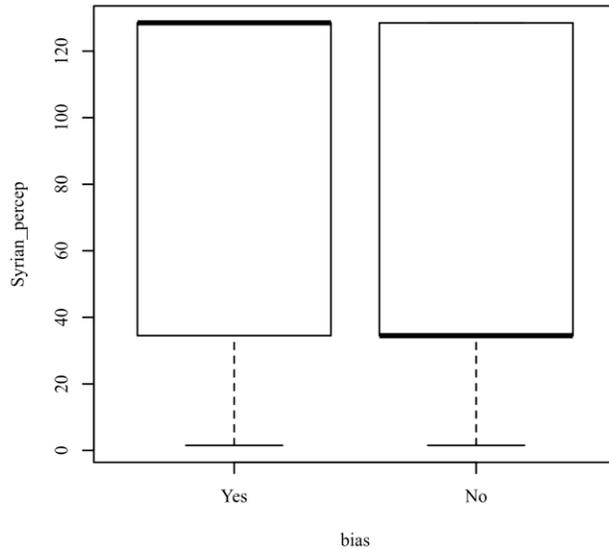
The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test were significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.24$ ,  $p = .022$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian perception was significantly different between the levels of bias. Table 3.6 presents the results of the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test. Figure 3.4 presents boxplots of the ranked values of Syrian perception by the levels of bias.

**Table 3.6***Kruskal-Wallis Rank Sum Test for Syrian perception by perceived bias*

Level	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	$df$	$p$
Yes	88.32	5.24	1	.022
No	71.44			

**Figure 3.4**

*Ranked Values of Syrian Perception by the levels of perceived bias*



**Post-hoc.** Pairwise comparisons were examined between each level of bias. The results of the multiple comparisons indicated significant differences based on an alpha value of 0.05 between Yes-No. Table 3.7 presents the results of the pairwise comparisons.

**Table 3.7**

*Pairwise Comparisons for the Mean Ranks of Syrian Perception by Bias*

Comparison	Observed Difference	Critical Difference
Yes-No	16.88	15.69

*Note.* Observed Differences > Critical Differences indicate significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for faith were significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(3) = 9.23$ ,  $p = .026$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian Perception

was significantly different between the levels of faith. Table 3.8 presents the results of the Kruskal-Wallis rank sum test. Figure 3.5 presents boxplots of the ranked values of Syrian Perception by faith.

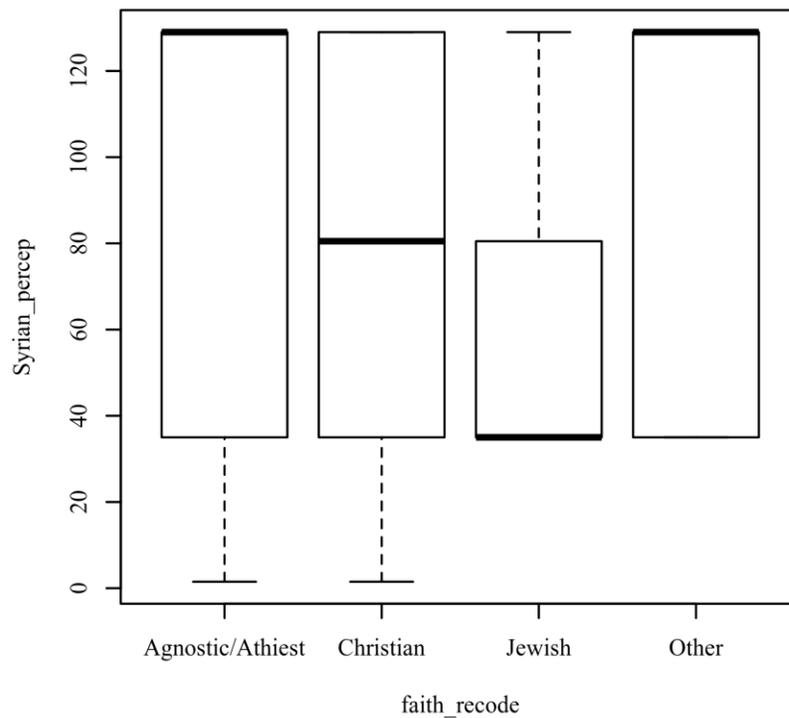
**Table 3.8**

*Kruskal-Wallis Rank Sum Test for Syrian Perception by faith*

Faith	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Agnostic/Atheist	90.47	9.23	3	.026
Christian	78.04			
Jewish	58.05			
Other	101.16			

**Figure 3.5**

*Ranked Values of Syrian Perception by faith*



**Post-hoc.** Pairwise comparisons were examined between each level of faith. The results indicated that none of the individual pairwise comparisons were significantly different. Table 3.9 presents the results of the pairwise comparisons.

**Table 3.9**

*Pairwise Comparisons for the Mean Ranks of Syrian Perception by faith*

Comparison	Observed Difference	Critical Difference
Agnostic/Atheist-Christian	12.43	24.94
Agnostic/Atheist-Jewish	32.42	45.07
Agnostic/Atheist-Other	10.69	34.28
Christian-Jewish	19.99	41.59
Christian-Other	23.12	29.56
Jewish-Other	43.11	47.78

*Note.* Observed Differences > Critical Differences indicate significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for field were not significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(4) = 0.68$ ,  $p = .953$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian Perception was similar for each level of field. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for gender were not significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.40$ ,  $p = .183$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian Perception was similar for each level of gender. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for political affiliation were not significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(3) = 1.19$ ,  $p = .756$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian Perception was similar for each level of political. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for region were not significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $\chi^2(5) = 5.40$ ,  $p = .369$ , indicating that the mean rank of Syrian Perception was similar for each level of region. Based on the Kruskal-Wallis test, there were significant differences in perception of Syrian women depending on age and faith of participants as well as their understanding of bias against this population.

When asked to select from a list of adjectives used to describe Syrian women with refugee status, participants most frequently chose “resilient” (79.6%) and “brave” (71.8%). The least frequent options chosen were “needy” (5.5%) and “sassy” (1.7%). The latter option was included in the selection list due to this descriptor being utilized frequently by state and local agency workers in previous interviews. Participants were permitted to select multiple responses. See Table 3.10 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.10**

*Which words describe Syrian women?*

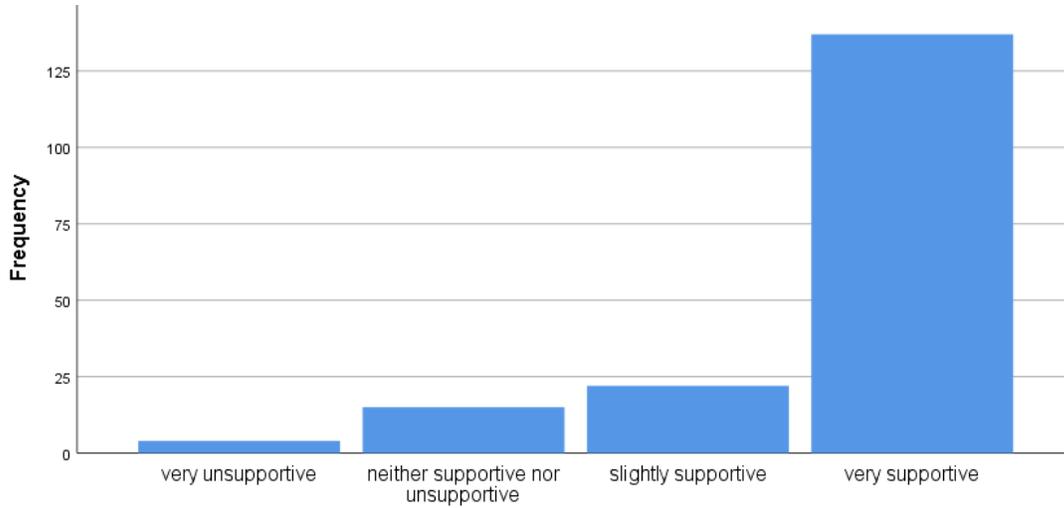
Variable	Number ( <i>n</i> )	Percentage (%)
Resilient	144	79.6
Brave	130	71.8
Unfortunate	36	19.9
Trustworthy	34	18.8
Needy	10	5.5
Sassy	3	1.7
Missing*	0	0

\*participants were able to select more than one option.

Participants were asked about their level of supportiveness for having professional guidelines in place for both Syrian women with refugee status and, more specifically, for Syrian mothers with refugee status. There were negligible discrepancies between the responses. The majority of participants – 137 (77%) and 135 (76.3%) in each category, respectively – stated that they were very supportive of such guidelines. Only 4 participants (2.2% and 2.3% respectively) stated that they were very unsupportive of such guidelines. No participants chose slightly unsupportive in either category. See Figure 3.6 and 3.7 for comparisons; note that the two charts are virtually identical.

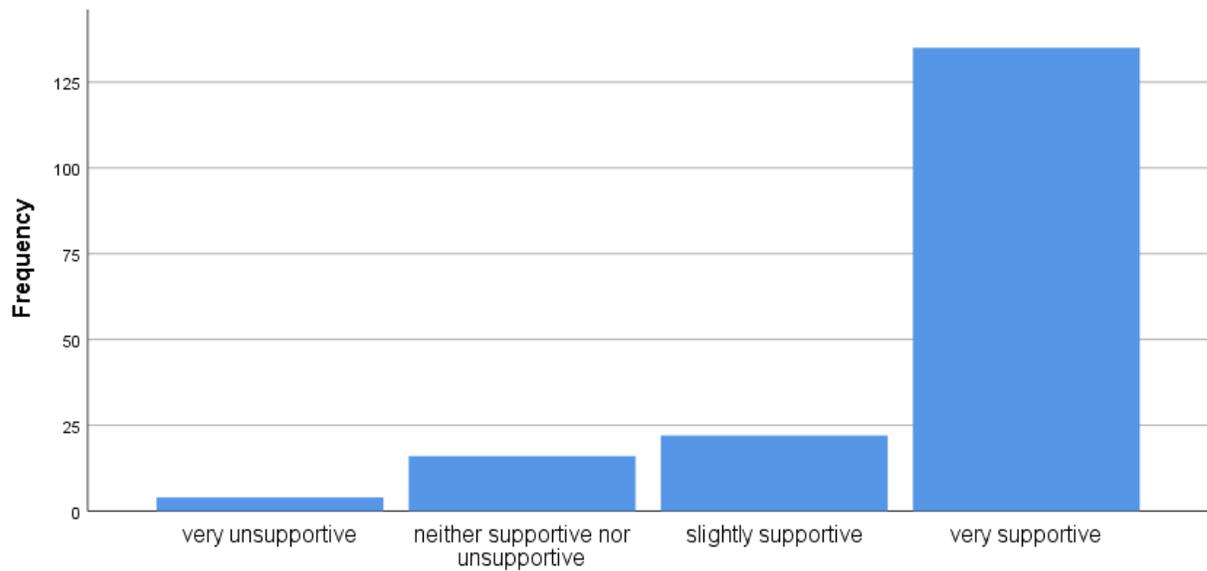
**Figure 3.6**

*Supportiveness of professional guidelines for Syrian women with refugee status*



**Figure 3.7**

*Supportiveness of professional guidelines for Syrian mothers with refugee status*



Additionally, participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions of bias in the community towards Syrian women with refugee status, and to rate their perceptions

of the most well-known national policy affecting Syrians at that time – Executive Order #13769, also known as the “Muslim Ban”. While not all Syrians are Muslim, the vast majority of Syrian refugees admitted into the United States in recent years identify with the Muslim faith (Refugee Processing Center, 2019). Therefore, these questions assist with further understanding of North Carolina social workers’ perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status overall.

The majority of respondents ( $n = 115$ , 63.5%) felt that there is bias in their community against Syrian women with refugee status. The participants were given the opportunity to explain their response further, and several themes began to emerge from these short answers. Respondents frequently identified a lack of knowledge about Syrian issues, a fear of Muslims, and general bias in the community as reasons they felt that bias against Syrian women with refugee status exists. The following are some of the comments that were received:

“I don't think many people know about Syrian women with refugee status, and [they] would be likely to discriminate against them because of their lack of knowledge.” ~ Agnostic participant in the Triangle region. “In my experience, our community fears what they do not know or understand” ~ Christian participant in the Triangle region; “there is always bias against people who are different in the US” ~ Christian participant in the Triangle region; “My community distrusts Muslims.” ~ Jewish participant in the Triad region; “Our community is biased towards all outsiders” ~ Christian participant in the Western region.

Some felt a need to distance themselves from the bias in their community, and one participant explained: “I believe they would be treated poorly, but not by social workers.” ~ Christian participant in the Triangle region; while another felt the need to justify any bias in the profession: “I believe most social workers would be well-meaning yet may exhibit bias due to lack of knowledge.” ~ Atheist participant in the Southeastern region.

Nearly one third of the participants felt that there is not an indication of bias against Syrian women with refugee status in their community ( $n = 54$ , 29.8%). However, their short answer responses indicated at times that there was perceived bias in the community, just not towards Syrian women *specifically*.

“The community overall is receptive of Syrian women with refugee status. I think fear might be more associated with Syrian men with refugee status.” ~ Other participant in the Triangle region; “I think there is a fear of and sometimes bias [against] all refugees in the community, but I don't think that most people are knowledgeable enough on the specifics of Syrian women to target them alone.” ~ Agnostic participant in the Triad region.

Others cited a lack of knowledge about the Syrian community in general or a lack of insight about any bias as their reason for selecting No: “I do not feel there is a bias locally on syrian women simply due to lack of exposure.” ~ Other participant in the Eastern region. Still others felt that the presence of other refugees in their area would insulate the Syrian women from any bias concerns. “We have a large refugee community already.” ~ Agnostic participant in the Triad region, “[My community is welcoming] towards refugees. Immigrants and refugees are valued by many community members here.” ~ Christian participant in the Triangle region. See Table 3.11 for breakdown of perception of bias against Syrian women with refugee status.

**Table 3.11***Fear of or Bias against Syrian Women with Refugee Status in your Community?*

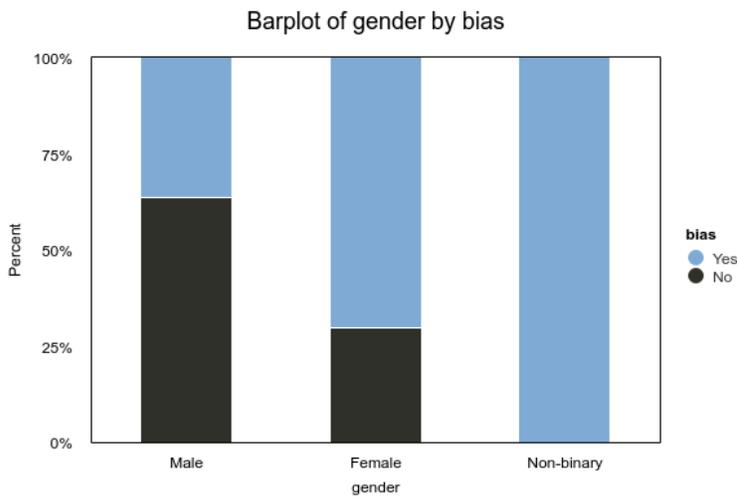
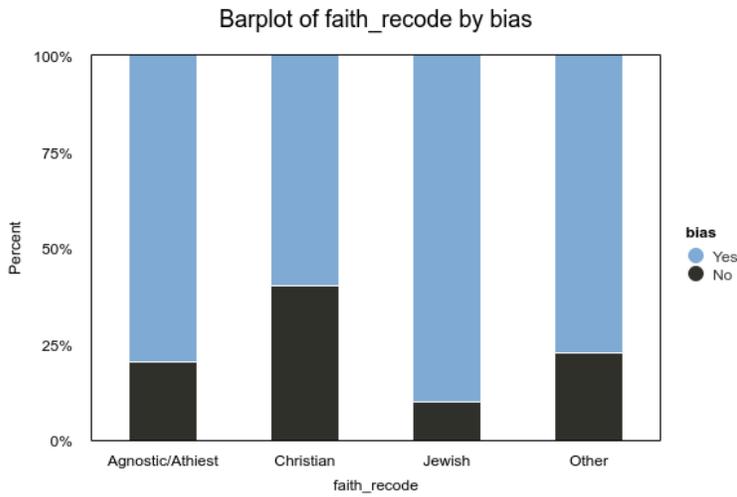
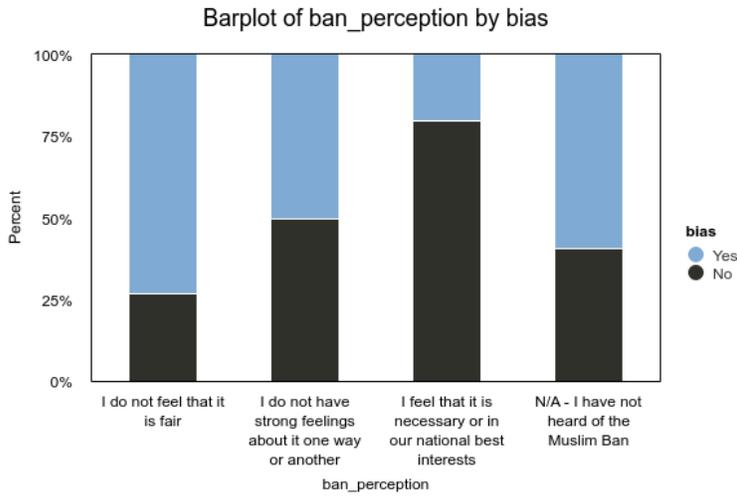
Response	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	115	63.54
No	54	29.83
Missing	12	6.63

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

However, when broken down further a different pattern emerges. When stratified by perception of the “Muslim Ban”, those who did not feel that it was fair were most likely to indicate a bias against Syrian women ( $n = 89, 72.4\%$ ), while those who felt that it was necessary were least likely ( $n = 1, 20\%$ ) to identify bias as a concern. When stratified by faith, those who identified as Jewish were most likely ( $n = 9, 90\%$ ) to indicate a bias against Syrian women while those who identified as Christian were least likely ( $n = 58, 58.6\%$ ) to identify bias as a concern. When stratified by gender, those who identified as nonbinary ( $n = 3, 100\%$ ) were most likely to indicate a bias against Syrian women while those who identified as male were least likely ( $n = 4, 36.4\%$ ) to identify bias as a concern. See Figure 3.8 for graphs of these breakdowns.

**Figure 3.8**

*Stratified Barplot of Bias*



The majority of participants had heard of the “Muslim Ban” ( $n = 136, 75.1\%$ ). Of those who responded, the majority also felt that this policy was unfair ( $n = 123, 68\%$ ). Only 5 participants (2.8%) felt that this policy was either necessary or in the nation’s best interests. See Table 3.12 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.12**

*Perception of Muslim Ban*

Response	Number ( <i>n</i> )	Percentage (%)
I do not feel that it is fair	123	67.96
I do not have strong feelings about it one way or another	7	3.87
I feel that it is necessary or in our national best interests	5	2.76
N/A - I have not heard of the Muslim Ban	32	17.68
Missing	14	7.73

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, percentages may not equal 100%.

Research Question #2: How do North Carolina social workers describe their perceived efficacy of their field of practice regarding work with Syrian women with refugee status?

Participants were asked to rate their level of confidence in their agency’s ability to meet the needs of Syrian women. The first four categories ranging from very unconfident to slightly confident had nearly equal distribution between them, with the frequencies ranging from 22.7% - 24.9%. However, only 10 respondents (5.5%) indicated that they felt very confident in their agency’s ability to meet the needs of Syrian women with refugee status.

When these responses were further delineated by field, the majority of participants in Education selected slightly confident ( $n = 7, 28\%$ ). The most frequently observed category of confidence for those in Community/Social Services was neither confident nor unconfident ( $n = 13, 32\%$ ). For those in the Medical field, the most frequently observed

category of confidence was neither confident nor unconfident ( $n = 8$ , 29%). For those in Mental Health/Substance Use, the most frequently observed category of confidence was very unconfident ( $n = 25$ , 32%). Finally, for participants in the Other category of field, the most frequently observed categories of confidence were slightly unconfident and slightly confident, each with an observed frequency of  $n = 3$  (38%). See Table 3.13 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.13**

*Level of Confidence in Agency Ability*

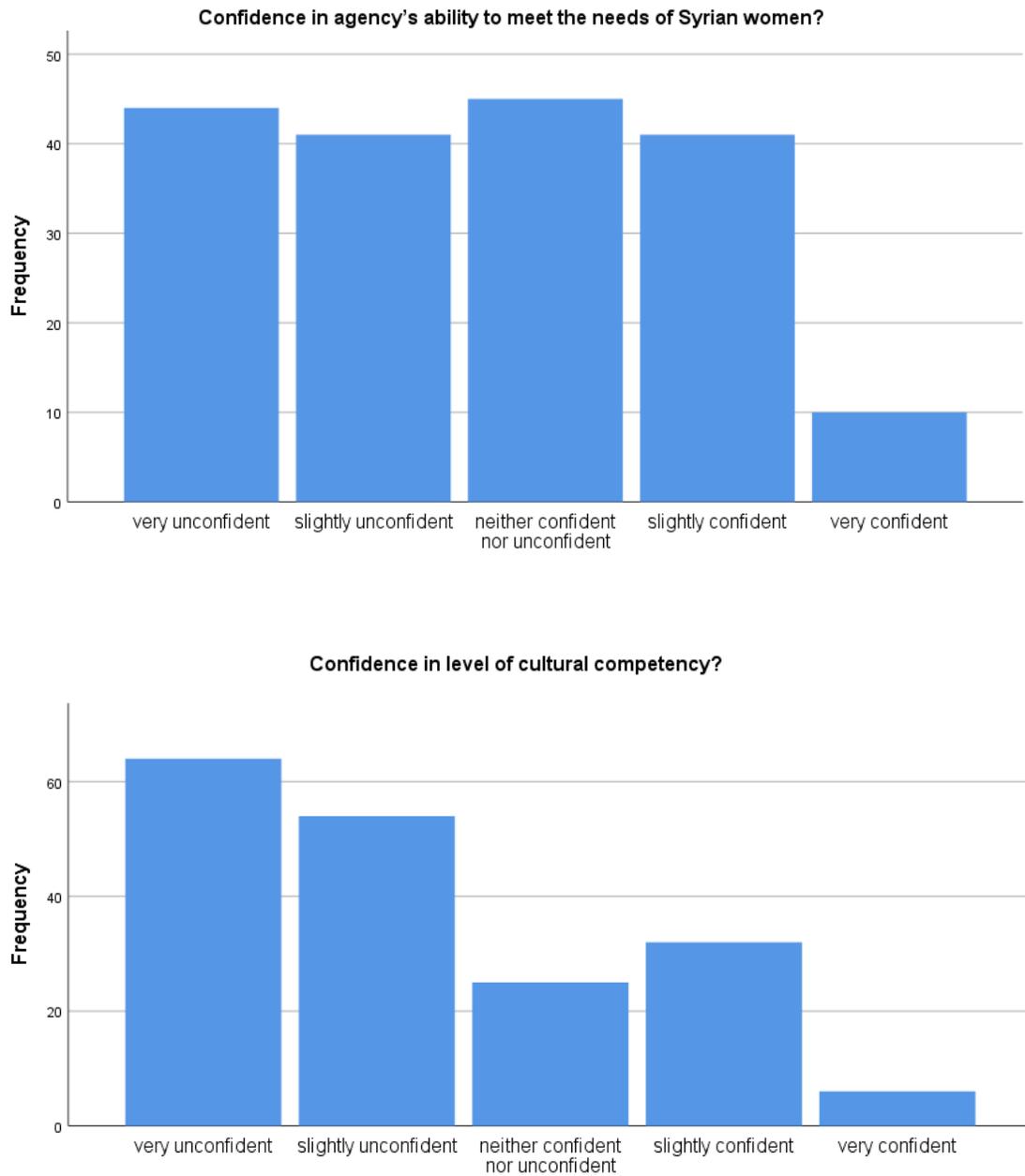
Variable	Education	Community/Social	Medical	MH/SUD	Other
confidence					
very unconfident	6 (24%)	8 (20%)	5 (18%)	25 (32%)	0 (0%)
slightly unconfident	5 (20%)	6 (15%)	7 (25%)	20 (25%)	3(38%)
neither confident nor unconfident	6 (24%)	13 (32%)	8 (29%)	17 (22%)	1(12%)
slightly confident	7 (28%)	9 (22%)	6 (21%)	16 (20%)	3(38%)
very confident	1 (4%)	5 (12%)	2 (7%)	1 (1%)	1(12%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, column wise percentages may not equal 100%.

Participants were also asked to rate their confidence in their level of cultural competency with regards to Syrian women with refugee status. The majority of participants ( $n = 118$ , 65.2%) felt either very or slightly unconfident, while only a fraction ( $n = 6$ , 3.3%) felt very confident in their level of cultural competency in this area. A histogram was created of each set of responses in order to visually compare participants' answers to these questions. From these visualizations, it is evident that respondents have less confidence in their own levels of cultural competency than they do in their agency's ability to meet the needs of Syrian women overall. See Figure 3.9 for comparison.

**Figure 3.9**

*Levels of Confidence in Agency and Cultural Competency*



When asked about where they obtained information pertaining to cultural competency, the majority of participants ( $n = 59, 32.6\%$ ) stated that they had sought

information on their own. The least chosen category was workplace trainings ( $n = 21$ , 11.6%). See Table 3.14 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.14**

*Location of Cultural Competency Training*

Variable	Number ( $n$ )	Percentage (%)
Sought information on my own	59	32.6
During course of degree study	50	27.6
Other	37	20.4
Social media	33	18.2
Personal experience	29	16
Continuing education	24	13.3
Workplace trainings	21	11.6
Missing*	0	0

\*participants were able to select more than one option.

Research Question #3: Are North Carolina social workers receptive to receiving additional training in order to meet the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?

Participants were asked to rate their level of interest in working with Syrian women with refugee status. The most frequently selected category ( $n = 86$ , 47.5%) was that of neither interested nor disinterested. However, a collective 44.2% ( $n = 80$ ) of the participants indicated that they were either slightly or very interested in working with this population. Only 8.3% ( $n = 15$ ) indicated that they were disinterested in working with Syrian women.

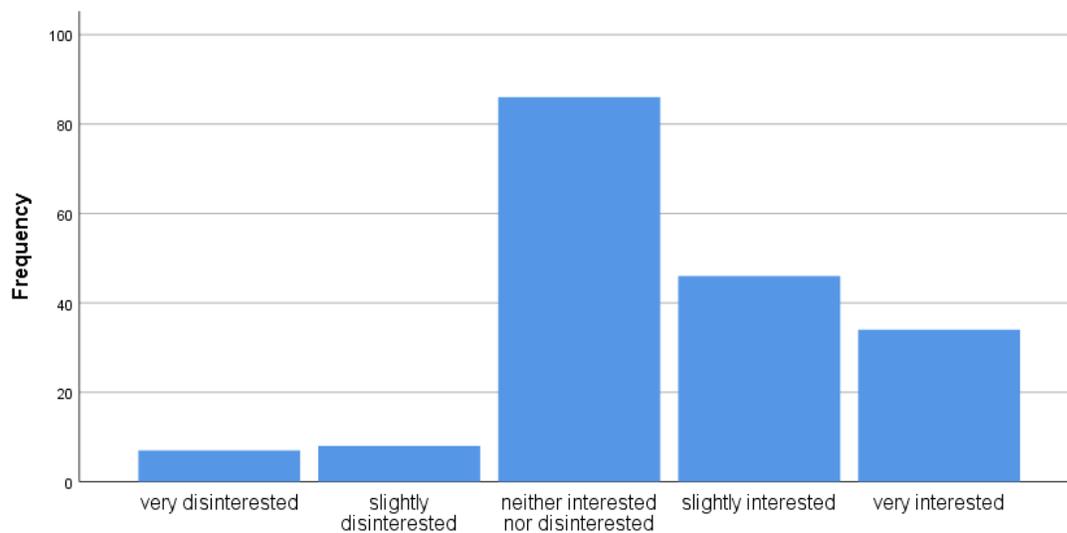
Participants were also asked to rate their level of interest in receiving training on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status. This question showed a shift in response patterns. The most frequently selected option ( $n = 84$ , 46.4%) was that of slightly interested, with an additional 23.2% ( $n = 42$ ) respondents stating that they were very interested in receiving this training. Only a small portion of respondents ( $n = 13$ , 7.2%)

indicated that they were slightly or very disinterested in receiving training regarding the needs of Syrian women with refugee status.

Again, a histogram was completed of each dataset to assist with visualizing the differences between the two response patterns. From these visualizations, it is evident that respondents have interest in receiving training on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status even if they do not have interest in working with this population. See Figure 3.10 and 3.11 for comparisons.

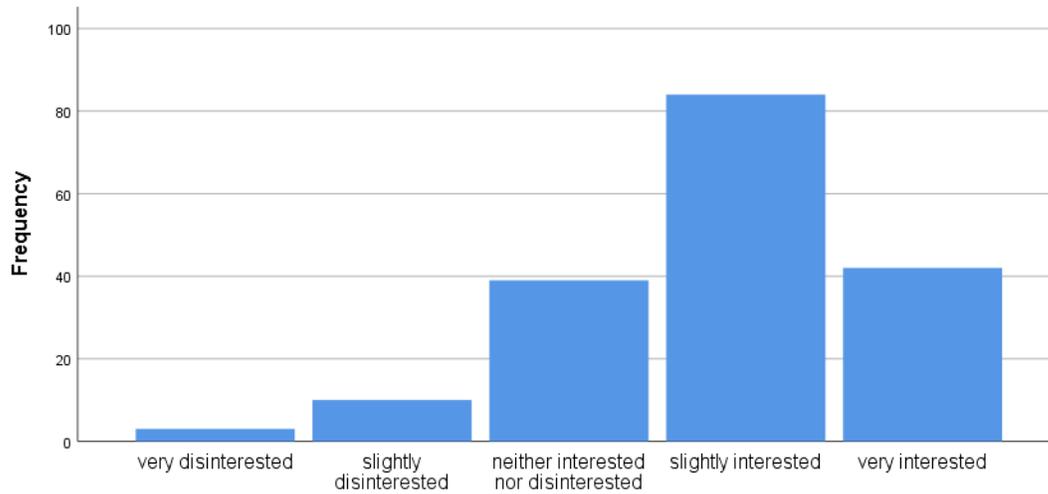
**Figure 3.10**

*Interest in Working with Syrian Women with Refugee Status*



**Figure 3.11**

*Interest in Training on Needs of Syrian Women with Refugee Status*



The categories of interest in working with and interest in training on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status were split by faith, field, political affiliation, and region to determine where the least and greatest amount of interest lies in these areas. The Jewish participants indicated the most interest in working with Syrian women directly. The most frequently observed category of interest was very interested ( $n = 4, 40\%$ ). The remaining faiths (Agnostic/Atheist, Christian, and Other) all showed equal interest in working with Syrian women with neither interested nor disinterested selected most frequently. All faiths selected the slightly interested category most frequently for interest in training on the needs of Syrian women. See Table 3.15 for Crosstabulations.

**Table 3.15***Frequency Table for Ordinal Variables*

Variable	Agnostic/Atheist	Christian	Jewish	Other
<b>Interest in working with Syrian women</b>				
very disinterested	1 (3%)	5 (5%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
slightly disinterested	3 (9%)	1 (1%)	1 (10%)	1 (5%)
neither interested nor disinterested	13 (38%)	49 (49%)	3 (30%)	11 (50%)
slightly interested	11 (32%)	27 (27%)	1 (10%)	5 (23%)
very interested	6 (18%)	17 (17%)	4 (40%)	5 (23%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Interest in training</b>				
very disinterested	2 (6%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
slightly disinterested	1 (3%)	2 (2%)	1 (10%)	4 (18%)
neither interested nor disinterested	5 (15%)	26 (26%)	2 (20%)	2 (9%)
slightly interested	18 (53%)	46 (46%)	6 (60%)	10 (45%)
very interested	8 (24%)	24 (24%)	1 (10%)	6 (27%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, column wise percentages may not equal 100%.

There was no difference in the interest levels by field, as each most frequently indicated that they were neither interested nor disinterested in working with Syrian women and slightly interested in training on their needs.

All political affiliations showed the same level of interest in working directly with Syrian women as they selected neither interested nor disinterested with equal frequency. However, those in the Independent category showed the most interest and those in the Republican category showed the least interest in receiving training on their needs. The most frequently observed category of interest in training for Independents was very interested ( $n = 19, 45\%$ ). The most frequently observed category of interest in training for Republicans was neither interested nor disinterested ( $n = 4, 80\%$ ). See Table 3.16 for summary statistics.

**Table 3.16***Frequency Table for Ordinal Variables*

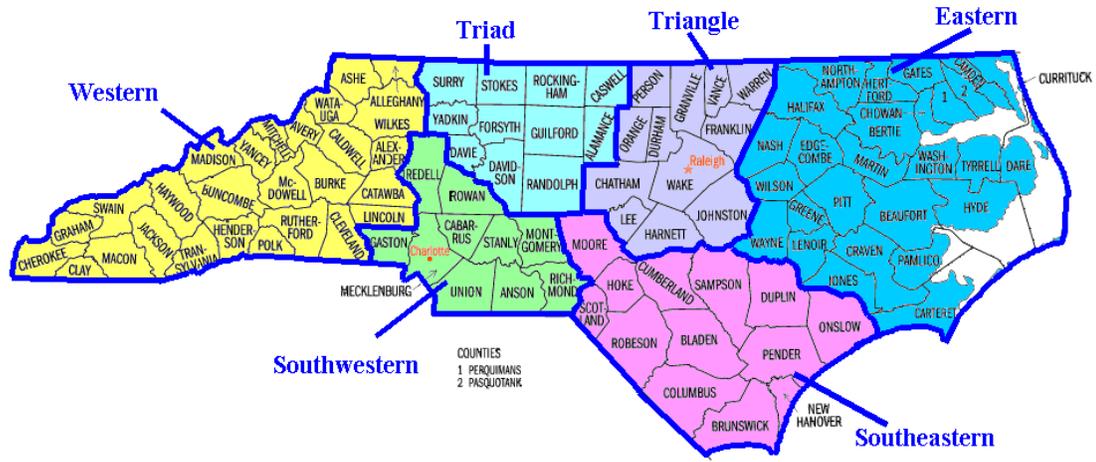
Variable	Democrat	Republican	Independent	Other
<b>Interest in working with Syrian women</b>				
very disinterested	4 (4%)	1 (20%)	1 (2%)	1 (7%)
slightly disinterested	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	1 (7%)
neither interested nor disinterested	49 (48%)	4 (80%)	15 (36%)	8 (53%)
slightly interested	31 (30%)	0 (0%)	13 (31%)	1 (7%)
very interested	16 (16%)	0 (0%)	11 (26%)	4 (27%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Interest in training</b>				
very disinterested	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	1 (7%)
slightly disinterested	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	2 (13%)
neither interested nor disinterested	23 (22%)	4 (80%)	6 (14%)	2 (13%)
slightly interested	58 (56%)	1 (20%)	14 (33%)	7 (47%)
very interested	17 (17%)	0 (0%)	19 (45%)	3 (20%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

*Note.* Due to rounding errors, column wise percentages may not equal 100%.

The Triad region expressed the most interest overall. The most frequently observed category of interest in working with Syrian women was neither interested nor disinterested ( $n = 9$ , 45%). The most frequently observed category of interest in training on their needs was very interested ( $n = 10$ , 50%). The Eastern region potentially showed the most interest in working with Syrian women directly. The most frequently observed categories of interest in working with Syrian women were neither interested nor disinterested and slightly interested as both were equally selected, each with an observed frequency of 8 (36%). The most frequently observed category of interest in training on their needs was slightly interested ( $n = 10$ , 45%). The remaining regions demonstrated equal interest, noting that they were neither interested nor disinterested in working with Syrian women and slightly interested in receiving training. See Figure 3.12 for region map and Table 3.17 for summary statistics.

**Figure 3.12**

Region map



**Table 3.17**

Frequency Table for Ordinal Variables

Variable	Western	Southwestern	Triad	Triangle	South-eastern	Eastern
Interest in working with Syrian women						
very disinterested	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
slightly disinterested	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
neither interested nor disinterested	10 (77%)	6 (50%)	9 (45%)	35 (44%)	8 (42%)	8 (36%)
slightly interested	2 (15%)	3 (25%)	3 (15%)	21 (27%)	7 (37%)	8 (36%)
very interested	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	8 (40%)	13 (16%)	4 (21%)	4 (18%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Interest in training						
very disinterested	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
slightly disinterested	0 (0%)	1 (8%)	0 (0%)	6 (8%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
neither interested nor disinterested	5 (38%)	2 (17%)	3 (15%)	16 (20%)	6 (32%)	3 (14%)
slightly interested	6 (46%)	8 (67%)	7 (35%)	41 (52%)	7 (37%)	10(45%)
very interested	2 (15%)	1 (8%)	10(50%)	14 (18%)	5 (26%)	8 (36%)
Missing	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Note. Due to rounding errors, column wise percentages may not equal 100%.

### *Openness*

In addition to the three primary research questions, an openness scale was created from five items within the overall survey to measure social workers' level of openness towards Syrian women with refugee status. These items were:

- Q6: Please rate your level of interest in working with Syrian women with refugee status.
- Q14: How interested are you in receiving training specifically on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?
- Q16: If there were professional guidelines in place specifically to support Syrian women with refugee status, how supportive would you be of them?
- Q17: If there were professional guidelines in place specifically to support Syrian mothers with refugee status, how supportive would you be of them?
- Q25: Is your overall perception of Syrian women with refugee status negative or positive?

The openness scale is conceptualized as representing a respondent's willingness to be accepting of Syrian women with refugee status, labeled "openness". SPSS was utilized to determine reliability of this scale by analyzing Cronbach's alpha, which revealed that  $\alpha = .704$ , indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

### *Linear Regression Analysis*

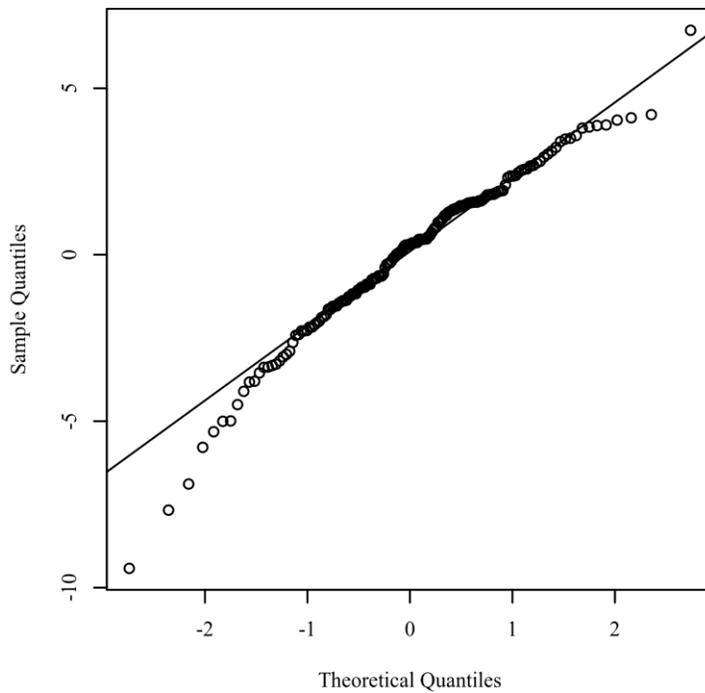
A linear regression analysis was conducted to assess whether cultural competence, confidence, bias, gender, and political significantly predicted openness.

**Normality.** The assumption of normality was assessed by plotting the quantiles of the model residuals against the quantiles of a Chi-square distribution, also called a Q-Q

scatterplot (DeCarlo, 1997). For the assumption of normality to be met, the quantiles of the residuals must not strongly deviate from the theoretical quantiles. Strong deviations could indicate that the parameter estimates are unreliable. Figure 3.13 presents a Q-Q scatterplot of the model residuals.

**Figure 3.13**

*Q-Q scatterplot for normality of the residuals for the regression model*



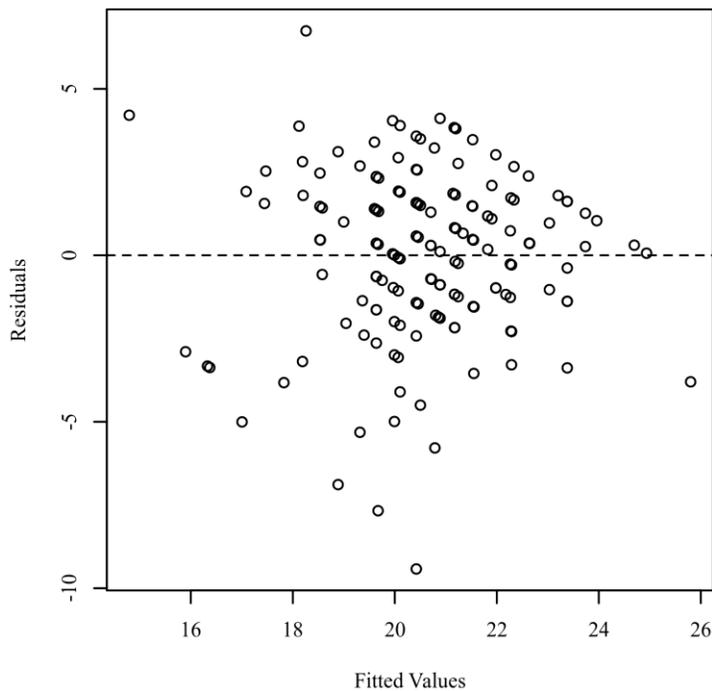
A Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to determine whether the model residuals could have been produced by a normal distribution (Razali & Wah, 2011). The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test were significant based on an alpha value of 0.05,  $W = 0.97$ ,  $p = .003$ . This result suggests the residuals of the model are unlikely to have been produced by a normal distribution, indicating the normality assumption is violated.

**Homoscedasticity.** Homoscedasticity was evaluated by plotting the residuals against the predicted values (Bates et al., 2014; Field, 2017; Osborne & Walters, 2002).

The assumption of homoscedasticity is met if the points appear randomly distributed with a mean of zero and no apparent curvature. Figure 3.14 presents a scatterplot of predicted values and model residuals.

**Figure 3.14**

*Residuals Scatterplot Testing Homoscedasticity*



**Multicollinearity.** Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were calculated to detect the presence of multicollinearity between predictors. High VIFs indicate increased effects of multicollinearity in the model. VIFs greater than 5 are cause for concern, whereas VIFs of 10 should be considered the maximum upper limit (Menard, 2009). All predictors in the regression model have VIFs less than 10. Table 3.18 presents the VIF for each predictor in the model.

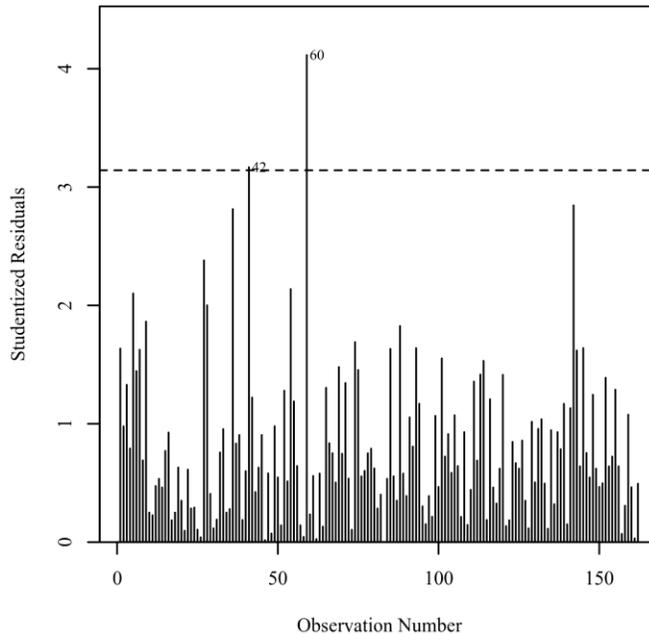
**Table 3.18***Variance Inflation Factors*

Variable	VIF
cultural comp	1.58
confidence	1.58
bias	1.14
gender	1.39
political	1.19

**Outliers.** To identify influential points, Studentized residuals were calculated and the absolute values were plotted against the observation numbers (Field, 2017; Pituch & Stevens, 2015). Studentized residuals are calculated by dividing the model residuals by the estimated residual standard deviation. An observation with a Studentized residual greater than 3.14 in absolute value, the 0.999 quartile of a  $t$  distribution with 161 degrees of freedom, was considered to have significant influence on the results of the model. Figure 3.15 presents the Studentized residuals plot of the observations. Observation numbers are specified next to each point with a Studentized residual greater than 3.14.

**Figure 3.15**

*Studentized Residuals Plot for Outlier Detection*



### *Results*

The results of the linear regression model were significant,  $F(14,147) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ , indicating that approximately 33% of the variance in openness is explainable by cultural competency, confidence, bias, gender, and political. The categories of slightly confident and very confident in perception of cultural competency significantly predicted openness. The slightly confident category of cultural competency significantly predicted openness,  $B = 1.56$ ,  $t(147) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .016$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the very unconfident to slightly confident category of cultural competency will increase the mean value of openness by 1.56 units on average. The very confident category of cultural competency significantly predicted openness,  $B = 3.98$ ,  $t(147) = 3.04$ ,  $p = .003$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the very unconfident to very confident category of cultural competency will increase the mean value of openness by 3.98 units on average.

Only the slightly confident category of confidence in agency's ability to support Syrian women with refugee status significantly predicted openness. The slightly confident category of confidence significantly predicted openness,  $B = 2.19$ ,  $t(147) = 3.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the very unconfident to slightly confident category of confidence will increase the mean value of openness by 2.19 units on average.

The Female category of gender significantly predicted openness,  $B = 2.60$ ,  $t(147) = 2.83$ ,  $p = .005$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the Male to Female category of gender will increase the mean value of openness by 2.60 units on average. The Non-binary category of gender significantly predicted openness,  $B = 5.99$ ,  $t(147) = 3.28$ ,  $p = .001$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the Male to Non-binary category of gender will increase the mean value of openness by 5.99 units on average.

Two items negatively predicted openness. With regards to perception of bias against Syrian women in the community, the No category significantly predicted openness,  $B = -1.10$ ,  $t(147) = -2.35$ ,  $p = .020$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the Yes to No category of bias will decrease the mean value of openness by 1.10 units on average. For political affiliation, the Republican category of political significantly predicted openness,  $B = -3.74$ ,  $t(147) = -3.06$ ,  $p = .003$ . Based on this sample, this suggests that moving from the Democrat to Republican category of political will decrease the mean value of openness by 3.74 units on average. See Table 3.19 for results of linear regression.

**Table 3.19***Results for Linear Regression*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	95% CI	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	17.04	1.03	[15.01, 19.08]	0.00	16.55	<.001
Cultural competency slightly unconfident	0.47	0.53	[-0.58, 1.51]	0.07	0.88	.379
Cultural competency neither confident nor unconfident	0.08	0.73	[-1.37, 1.53]	0.01	0.11	.913
Cultural competency slightly confident	1.56	0.64	[0.30, 2.82]	0.20	2.44	.016
Cultural competency very confident	3.98	1.31	[1.39, 6.56]	0.23	3.04	.003
Confidence slightly unconfident	0.78	0.61	[-0.41, 1.98]	0.11	1.30	.197
Confidence neither confident nor unconfident	1.07	0.64	[-0.19, 2.33]	0.15	1.68	.095
Confidence slightly confident	2.19	0.65	[0.91, 3.46]	0.31	3.38	<.001
Confidence very confident	1.08	1.02	[-0.93, 3.10]	0.08	1.06	.289
Bias No	-1.10	0.47	[-2.03, -0.18]	-0.17	-2.35	.020
Gender Female	2.60	0.92	[0.78, 4.41]	0.24	2.83	.005
Gender Non-binary	5.99	1.83	[2.38, 9.60]	0.27	3.28	.001
Political Republican	-3.74	1.22	[-6.15, -1.33]	-0.22	-3.06	.003
Political Independent	0.36	0.50	[-0.63, 1.34]	0.05	0.72	.476
Political Other	-0.74	0.74	[-2.20, 0.72]	-0.07	-1.00	.318

*Note.* Results:  $F(14,147) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.33$ ; categories of Male and Democrat excluded as this is the comparison for other categories.

### *Discussion (Strengths and Limitations)*

The majority of participants expressed a positive view of Syrian women with refugee status. The overwhelming majority believe that Syrian women with refugee status are resilient (79.6%) and brave (71.8%), with only a very small percentage (5.5%)

choosing a negative descriptor such as “needy”. This is in line with existing research which indicates that the U.S. public welcomes Syrian refugees who are female more so than their male counterparts (Adida et al., 2019). One participant stated this very clearly: “I feel positive about my perceptions of any person seeking refuge, but slightly more so for women because of the increased marginalization they experience.” Overall, the social workers who responded were extremely supportive of having professional guidelines in place for working with both Syrian women and Syrian mothers. This is particularly important information for those involved in policy decisions to understand that social workers may generally welcome such guidelines.

When asked to further expand on their perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status, participants often cited personal experience as an important factor. Those who had direct contact with this population held a very positive viewpoint. One participant stated simply: “I have Syrian neighbors and they have taught me so much. I'm grateful for them.” ~ Christian participant, Southeastern region. However, others cited a different aspect of personal experience as being a factor in their neutral perception towards these women – not because they had a previously negative experience, but because they had no experience or interaction at all. Participants frequently cited their lack of contact as a reason to maintain a neutral stance. Research indicates that perspective-taking can improve inclusive behavior towards Syrian refugees (Adida et al., 2018), and as direct interaction increases perspective taking, this is potentially an indication that offering more opportunities for social workers to engage directly with this population will increase their welcome of Syrian women with refugee status.

Based on the results of this survey, the social workers who responded vary on their levels of confidence in their agency's ability to support the needs of Syrian women with refugee status. Forty seven percent of respondents feel unconfident in this area, while only 5.5% are very confident in agency's ability to do so. Participants are less confident in their levels of cultural competency regarding this population. Of the respondents, 65.2% of respondents feel unconfident in this area, while only 3.3% feel very confident in their level of cultural competency. However, the responses for level of agency confidence were fairly evenly distributed indicating that social workers place more trust in their agencies to be prepared to meet these needs than their own cultural knowledge.

With regards to cultural competency, participants are most frequently seeking out information on their own, followed closely by training at school. They are least likely to receive such training in the workplace. This is an important distinction and area of improvement for local employers to be aware of so they can include opportunities for future trainings on the needs of this population regardless of their specific practice area. While some respondents noted outside personal experience with this population through either church outreach or volunteer work, others made concerning assumptions about their abilities. For example, one respondent stated: "although I have no experience with Syrian women with refugee status, I am confident as a Black male to be culturally competent in any circumstance." ~ Other participant in the Triangle area. This type of hubris holds the potential to lead to bias and misunderstandings in practice and serves to underscore the need for cultural competency training in this population specifically.

Despite lukewarm interest in working directly with Syrian women with refugee status, a majority of participants were interested in receiving training regarding this population's needs. Of the respondents, 44.2% (80) indicated interest in working with compared to 69.6% (126) interest in receiving training. This may demonstrate the participants' commitment to ongoing learning, particularly with regards to increasing cultural competency as this is a central requirement within the field of social work. This is particularly relevant given that Diaconu et al. (2018) expressed that many social workers are unaware of their engagement with refugee populations and require training to ensure adequate practice therein. Respondents indicated that they held particular interest in trainings around the topics of pregnancy and birth, grief and loss, death rituals, trauma and mental health, and religious practices. These may be areas to focus on throughout academia and other trainings in order to increase interest in continuing education.

In one study of German social workers engaged in practice with refugee populations, the social workers noted the importance of understanding not only nationwide political aspects but also their own personal political views which may act as a barrier to service for their clients (Hague et al., 2019). One notable takeaway is that the majority of respondents identified as Democrats ( $n = 103, 56.9\%$ ), which is particularly interested given that North Carolina is a predominantly Republican state. There are partisan considerations to refugee issues. Political affiliation matters as Democrats are more likely to be open to perspective taking exercises designed to be inclusive of Syrian refugees than Republicans according to certain studies. Republicans also demonstrate the ability to become more open towards Syrian refugees, but with a smaller effect size (Adida et al., 2018).

As there is an ever-growing gap in partisan politics related to refugee issues, it is important to take political affiliation into account (Adida et al., 2018). Although social workers are guided to address their own personal biases and ethically mandated to support the most vulnerable in society, social workers may be unaware of their biases or feel constrained by legislation and agency procedure when providing services. Social workers must remain vigilant against bias during times in which the government/legislation may be harmful towards refugees, as it is currently. It is important that social workers maintain fidelity to the core values of the profession by maintaining an anti-oppressive stance (Dominelli, 2017).

When bias is not addressed, it can affect decision making ability in practice settings (Featherston et. al, 2019); therefore, it is important to assess and understand biases which social workers may hold. Biases can often appear in faith practices and political views. Although the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated significant differences in Syrian perception amongst the various faiths represented, the post hoc test did not provide a conclusive outcome for this which could indicate that there is a more complex interaction involved than the test measured. Social workers who responded to the survey and identified as Republican expressed less likelihood of acknowledging community bias against Syrian women, lower levels of openness towards them, and less interest in being trained on their needs. Additionally, a lower likelihood of acknowledging community bias is associated with differences in Syrian perception. However, Adida et al. (2019) note that being female protects Syrian refugees from anti-Muslim bias, so it may be wise to begin training social workers on the needs of Syrian women specifically for this reason.

Although the linear regression had a violation of the normality assumption, research notes that these models are robust to assumption violations and still provide important information about analysis. Additionally, removing outliers can significantly bias the model and should therefore be avoided (Smith & Finan, 2018). Thus, the model is appropriate to use in this analysis as-is and provides an accurate representation of the data herein. This model demonstrates that 33% of the concept of openness can be predicted by a social worker's confidence in their agency's ability to meet the needs of Syrian women, their perception of their own cultural competency in this area, their understanding of community bias, their gender, and their political affiliation. This information can be beneficial for future researchers to consider when designing larger and more robust studies.

### *Strengths*

Notable strengths of this study include that a wide range of social worker perspectives were represented in the responses. Respondents hailed from every region in the state, represented every level of educational attainment, came from a wide variety of practice settings, and indicated diverse faith backgrounds. Furthermore, this is the first study of its kind to inquire about the perspectives of social workers in North Carolina towards Syrian women with refugee status, to the knowledge of this researcher. Although it is primarily an exploratory study, the information contained in this study could be valuable to inform future research, provide insight to social work educational programs, and provide insight regarding potential outreach and training options to the state refugee office.

### *Limitations*

A limitation to this study is the smaller sample size and lack of generalizability. Another limitation is that the responses from the refugee workers and Muslim participants could not be analyzed in their own categories due to low number of respondents in these categories, which required these responses to be merged into larger categories for analysis. Their responses could have provided pertinent insight for this study's purposes. Furthermore, some researchers note that applying a U.S.-based model of social work to Middle Eastern Muslim populations is incongruent with their needs, and that lack of input from those familiar with the needs and perspectives of Middle Eastern Muslims can be harmful (Ragab, 2016).

A majority of participants were Christians and Democrats, although only slightly more than half of respondents fell into these categories. This is not surprising given that social work has its roots in Christianity, and that social workers tend to be predominantly affiliated with the Democratic party due to more liberal views of the profession (Rosenwald, 2006). However, this does limit the extent of the analysis and may provide for similarity in responses due to increased homogeneity of viewpoints. Additionally, there may have been some selection bias from the participants. Despite the majority indicating that they were neither interested nor disinterested in working with Syrian women with refugee status, there was still a trend towards being interested in working with this population. It is possible that those who were less interested in working with this population simply avoided partaking in the survey, which may have skewed the results towards a more favorable view of Syrian women.

### *Implications*

There are several implications resulting from this survey. First, it is necessary to continue understanding the perceptions of social workers towards Syrian women with refugee status both in North Carolina and beyond. Based on the outcome of this survey, it would be beneficial to further study the impact of faith, gender, and political affiliation on these perspectives. Additionally, future research should focus on empirically measuring changes in social workers' attitudes towards and understanding of this population after increased cultural competency training. Places of employment should clearly communicate plans to address the needs of Syrian women with refugee status even if they are unsure if their agency will serve this population. One way to accomplish this would be to include an annual training requirement.

Further inquiry on factors affecting social workers' interest level in working with this population and receiving appropriate training are needed still. This will help create targeted interventions to increase social worker engagement with Syrian women with refugee status and improve knowledge in the field therein. The concept of openness is in part related to these levels and it is recommended that a more formal scale is created and tested to measure this concept and the factors related to it. A much larger and more in-depth study solely on the political ideologies and faith perspectives of social workers would be beneficial in order to understand more about how these aspects of the workers' identities affect their perception of and desire to work with this population. The concepts of faith perspective along with policy views and gender contributed to respondents understanding of bias against Syrian women and therefore these aspects should be studied more in depth as well.

It is imperative to include Arab and Muslim perspectives in social work perspectives, particularly as globalization increases. Because of underlying ontological and epistemological worldviews in Islam, it is important to have social workers and practices which not only understand these perspectives but incorporate them into praxis (Ragab, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary that schools of social work intentionally recruit Arab and Muslim students, that agencies intentionally hire Arab and Muslim social workers, and that policy is created with the inclusion of their specific input.

### *Conclusion*

This study holds the potential for significant change in the practice of refugee resettlement with Syrian women in the state of North Carolina and beyond. There are several takeaways to guide future research and practice including most notably the need for inclusion of Islamic perspectives and the importance of increased cultural competency training on tendency to welcome this population. Social workers may need a certain level of confidence not only in their own skills, but in the practices of their agency in order to feel ready to work with Syrian women with refugee status. It is imperative that the field of social work looks closely at these issues in order to adequately prepare for supporting Syrians when they are finally allowed to seek safety here again.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter published as: Thomas, K. (2020). Sacred Connections: Using faith-based narratives to create matricentric empowerment spaces for Syrian refugee women. *Social Work and Christianity*, 47(3), 16–32. <https://doi.org/10.34043/swc.v47i3.79>

### Abstract

The Syrian conflict has created the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known, and while women and children are extremely vulnerable, the unique needs of refugee mothers are often overlooked in both policy and practice. Great importance is placed on motherhood roles in both Western and Arabic cultures, and providing targeted support to uplift refugee mothers can have significant positive ramifications as Syrian refugees resettle into their new lives. Guided by Brené Brown’s insights on empathy and drawing parallels from crossover stories of Biblical women in both Christian and Islamic traditions, the author uses sacred connections to build empathy and enact social change. This paper highlights ways that Christian social workers can adopt a matricentric (mother-focused) approach and provides a recommended interfaith model for intervention with Syrian refugee mothers.

*Keywords:* interfaith, refugees, social work, Christian, Muslim, Syria, matricentric support, empathy, empowerment

Christians are called by faith to walk with the most vulnerable. Jesus came here for the marginalized and guides us to see that pastoral care should be for the benefit of the marginalized as well (Steyn, 2010). There are several instances where the Bible directly commands us to welcome refugees (Goss-Reaves, et al., 2018), and the concept of forced migration is central to Biblical texts. Perhaps the most recognized Biblically-based migration story is that of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt – detailing how an entire civilization fled the country in search of safety and found protection through God. Some may actually view the Israelites as refugees in this context (Guzman, 1997), but at a minimum this story exemplifies forced migration due to restrictive policies and unjust conditions. While many of the Israelites ultimately returned to their homeland, some did not - much like today's people who are also forced into patterns of migration and unable to return to their homes due to well-founded fear of persecution (Admirand, 2014), which is part of the UNHCR's definition of a refugee.

The Bible provides us with guidance as Christians on how to handle refugees and migrants. In fact, God commands what is arguably the first refugee resettlement policy in Judeo-Christian tradition in Exodus 22:21 by stating: *“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”* (NRSV). Here, with unequivocal distinction, we are told to welcome refugees. This instruction extends beyond Biblical times, though, and is still relevant today, as the world continues to see an astonishing number of people forcibly displaced globally. Beyond this directive, the New Testament brings us face to face with refugee resettlement concerns in the very story of Jesus, the central figure of the Christian faith. Matthew 2:13-15 explains that Joseph left Bethlehem with Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt, where they remained for safety until the death of

Herod. Christians addressing refugee resettlement concerns are therefore reminded that Jesus was a refugee. Simultaneously, they are called to welcome refugees through numerous Biblical passages. Christians are also reminded that justice comes through serving and attending to the needs of others, and many would argue that we must strive to see God in all refugees (Lopez Perez, 2012).

The primary message of the gospel is to welcome others, and Christians are called to promote peace on a global scale by following God's directive to love refugees and being a voice for positive change in society. Everyone, without distinction, is included in God's grace, and Romans 15:7 reminds us that we are called to accept others as God has accepted us: "*Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*" (NRSV) This concept of welcome is so central to the message of the gospels that it can be viewed as the theme of Jesus' reconciliation of humanity. Human suffering, violence, and inequality are all signs of our need for communion, which can only be achieved through genuine hospitality of those who are displaced. Being Christian by default means welcoming everyone, because the Christian has been forgiven and reconciled through the Lord, so we too must now welcome others as we were once welcomed as well (Constantineanu, 2018).

Since Christianity holds that all people are God's children, it is therefore incumbent upon the Christian practitioner to welcome everyone in creation. Furthermore, Christians should understand not only that God loves all people, but that He calls us to use our gifts as practitioners to help those in need. Christian social workers must align their values with professional expectations to promote and accept diversity, and this is done through the recognition that God created all people in His image, making them

worthy of dignity and love. We are called to love others and protect the marginalized and oppressed and bring positive social change through advocacy, which includes the needs of refugees (Goss-Reaves et al., 2018). As the current Syrian conflict has created the largest refugee crisis ever known (Hassan, 2016), this paper will focus on the Syrian population.

This article is intended to encourage Christian social workers to deepen their support of, and empathy towards, Syrian refugee mothers. While this conversation could be applied to a broader audience of Christians in general and all refugee women, I focus specifically on social workers and Syrians for two reasons. First, as a social worker myself, I am intentionally speaking to my professional colleagues because I recognize the incredible ability of social workers to enact change on both the interpersonal and the societal level. Second, I am directing my intentions towards Syrian refugees with hopes of offsetting the extreme marginalization this population faces in the United States (and much of the Western world) today. I focus specifically on Syrian mothers because I believe that motherhood and mothering play critical roles in all societies, so therefore supporting mothers specifically will also have positive ramifications throughout the community. Finally, I am focusing on the interactions of women-with-women because this is most culturally appropriate for the population being discussed due to cultural norms. For these reasons, I will focus on the intersection of Christian mothers with Syrian refugee mothers to highlight ways that Christian social workers can adopt a matricentric (mother-focused) approach while utilizing sacred connections to build empathy and enact social change.

More specifically, matricentric feminism is defined by its founder Andrea O'Reilly (2019) as follows:

*Matricentric feminism emphasizes that the category of mother is distinct from the category of women and that many of the challenges mothers face - social, economic political, cultural, psychological - are specific to women's role and identity as mothers. Matricentric feminism is explicitly matrifocal in its perspective and emphasis – it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering, and positions mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politic on and for women's empowerment. (p. 13)*

This concept is an integral component to understanding the topic of Syrian refugee mothers because addressing their unique needs is important in ensuring their successful integration post-resettlement.

While Syrians are not homogeneously Muslim, a robust 87% of the population is Muslim (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2011), and roughly 98% of Syrians admitted to the United States through the refugee program in FY 2016 and FY 2017 – the years in which the United States accepted the most Syrian refugees - identified as Muslim (Refugee Processing Center, 2019). Therefore, we will discuss the similarities between female narratives in both Christianity and Islam in order to foster connection between the two faiths. Storytelling can be a powerful way to foster connection and recognize that we are all more alike than different. I will utilize the crossover stories of women found in both the Christian and Islamic traditions in order to identify points of

shared connection and emphasize ways religion and faith stories can be unifying when used in the context of interfaith social support. First, it is important to understand why this particular demographic is marginalized in our society in order to gain a deeper understanding of the need for the practice methods proposed in this article.

### *Syrian Marginalization*

Anti-Islamic views have been growing in the United States since the 1960s and were worsened by U.S. government policies instituted following the 9/11 attacks. The prevailing narrative became an “us vs. them” dynamic which polarized U.S. society and allowed religious and ethnic stereotypes to perpetuate misconceptions about Muslims. This effectively separated them as “un-American” and made the post-9/11 era in the United States hostile to all Arabs and Muslims (Fadda-Conrey, 2011). Islamic terrorism became a focus of U.S. policy as a national security threat after the 9/11 attacks. The fear of Islamic terrorism has led to a fear of Muslim refugees, which set the stage for the Syrian conflict and the numerous resulting refugees to appear threatening rather than as vulnerable persons impacted by a humanitarian crisis (Scribner, 2017).

The Syrian war is responsible for creating the largest refugee crisis the world has ever known, with approximately half of the entire population fleeing the country by 2016 (Hassan, 2016). Survivors have endured a significant amount of trauma from their experience (George, 2012) and female refugees are at greater risk of gender-based violence, rape, survival sex, forced marriage, and more (Yasmine, 2016). As a result, there is a significant amount of psychological trauma experienced by Syrian refugee women and often Syrian women suffer from toxic stress, which impacts them throughout their lives and into adulthood and motherhood (Acim, 2017). This stress continues to

have an adverse effect after resettlement as well and should be taken into consideration when providing support in order to mitigate the damage from their traumatic experiences.

The increased discrimination from a rise in anti-Islamic views has significantly impacted women and young girls who have borne the brunt of the backlash, as they are often more easily identifiable by their style of dress (Barkdull, et al., 2011). Many report feelings of isolation and changes in their family and social structures after fleeing to a new country as well (Al-Natour, et al., 2019). When Syrian women do not feel integrated with their new society, this can further complicate their displacement (Ozkaleli, 2018). Government policies often do not take into account the needs of mothers or the cultural expectations that refugee women may place on their role of motherhood as the highest priority in their lives. There is often conflict between the expectations placed on these women after resettlement and their own perceptions of their needs, which can cause a significant amount of stress for refugee mothers and limit their choices in their new lives (Vervliet, et al., 2014).

### *Motherhood Issues*

Refugee mothers have different experiences than their immigrant or asylee counterparts as the mere experience of being a refugee brings unique challenges that come only with the refugee experience (Ahmed et al., 2017). While all three classifications of migrants leave their home countries in search of a better life, the circumstances surrounding their moves are different and thus impact their post-arrival outcomes. Immigrants move voluntarily to improve their living circumstances, asylees seek protection from a host country after having already arrived there, whereas refugees are forced to flee their homes to seek safety (Gagnon et al. 2013). Refugees may spend

several years in refugee camps before being resettled in a new country. Living in a refugee camp may bring physical or sexual violence, family relationships are disrupted, and resettlement may bring a loss of social identity or status (Ahmed et al., 2017). Social isolation and difficulty integrating into a new culture can worsen symptoms of any adverse mental health effects and negatively impact adjustment post-resettlement (Hassan, 2016). Women may feel particularly alienated and “othered,” whether by religious or cultural preferences or gender expectations which are incongruent with the dominant society, and thus may find themselves existing beneath multiple layers of oppression in their new home community (Ozkaleli, 2018).

Furthermore, many Syrian women may be distrustful of social workers and others offering assistance because of previous negative interactions in the refugee camps with workers exploiting them, being discriminatory, or behaving in a harassing manner towards them. It is important that interventions for Syrian women are multi-systemic and target change at the greater social pressures impacting these women instead of simply interpersonal interventions, which often places a greater burden upon them (Yasmine, 2016). Therefore, Christian social workers must be particularly mindful of this dynamic and aim to be sensitive to this concern and provide appropriate supports.

Research has indicated that social support can have positive ramifications on Syrian mothers in terms of both psychological resilience and parenting efficacy post-resettlement. Emotional support related to receiving empathy from others appears to be particularly important in this dynamic, although further research is still needed to determine the best types of support for Syrian mothers overall. Interestingly, Syrian refugee mothers may have a perception that others have had similar life experiences

which may be a barrier to seeking support (Sim, 2019). This means that they may assume that the women in their host country have been through similar traumas and feel pressure to function at similar levels simply by assuming that their backgrounds are congruent. This may be a pertinent point to recognize, as addressing this may break down barriers to both accepting and giving care, and Christian social workers working with this population can and should remain mindful of their specific needs when providing interventions. One way to achieve this is to ensure that Syrian refugee mothers are regularly engaged with mothers from the local population in a supportive and empathetic environment.

So how do Christian social workers supporting Syrian refugees fully embrace this partnership and determine the best way of uplifting these women? Guided by world-renowned social worker Brené Brown's research on empathy, I urge Christian women to see themselves in Syrian refugee women through reflecting on ways in which their lives have similarities and points of shared connection. Brown uses the following definition of empathy: "Empathy is described as the ability to perceive a situation from the other person's perspective—to see, hear, and feel the unique world of the other" (Brown, 2006). In her 2013 RSA video *The Power of Vulnerability*, she notes that empathy drives connection between people. "Empathy is a choice, and it's a vulnerable choice. In order to connect with you, I have to connect with something in myself that knows that feeling" (Brown, 2013<sub>b</sub>). She further notes in her book *Daring Greatly* that "Empathy is...communicating that incredibly healing message of you're not alone" (Brown, 2013<sub>a</sub>, p. 81). With this in mind, focusing on empathy can then be the driving force behind connection, healing, and transformative change. Therefore, we turn to what we know of

mothers in sacred stories to find that shared connection, a point of recognition where the Christian woman can see something of herself in Syrian woman, so that the two can begin the work of healing through empathy.

### *Sacred Connections*

For the purposes of this article, we will focus only on the women who share crossover stories in each faith tradition or who are mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur'an. This allows for reflexivity between all of the women involved and the recognition of shared connection amongst them. It is important to note that in Islamic culture, a mother is revered as having a strong and salient connection to God. Furthermore, mothers and mothering are considered an intricate part of the fabric of society and, as such, must be both understood and nourished in their unique context in relation to the rest of society. Additionally, both religious traditions focus on the concept of "grace," which can be found specifically amongst mothers (Upal, 2005). For the purpose of this argument, we will focus on three specific stories: those of Hagar, Miriam and Jochebed, and Mary. As we review these stories, it is important to be mindful of Brené Brown's four steps to building empathy: perspective taking (viewing the world through another's experience), staying out of judgment (remaining neutral), recognizing the emotion (identifying a time you have felt similarly), and communication (stating that you relate to the experience) (Brown, 2013<sub>b</sub>) as these steps will be pertinent to implementing the model recommended in the discussion section. In doing so, we will be able to build empathy towards women in these situations and prepare to utilize this perspective when relating to our Syrian mothers.

## *Hagar*

The story of Hagar has multiple layers of meaning pertaining to our focus. Indeed, the very name Hagar means “flight,” and her story is connected to the need to flee twice in the Bible. Likewise, the refugee women in our discussion have also had to flee their homes. Additionally, as an Egyptian, she comes from another culture and is inherently “othered” by nature of being different from the rest of the women around her (Murphy, 2012) and is, similarly to today’s refugees, considered a resident alien. She holds spiritual significance for those far from home or separated from family and is strongly associated with those in exile (Sherwood, 2014). However, the surprising aspect of this narrative comes in the intertwined nature of Hagar’s story with Sarah’s. The Biblical story describes their unique connection as one that transcends race, ethnicity, culture, and social status; Arabic tradition details their relationship as closely connected. With this in mind, Hagar’s story provides an example of the type of cross-cultural connection women can have which can literally change the course of world events. Although the relationship is complex, both women are ultimately deeply blessed by God through their interactions (Murphy, 2012). In fact, it is precisely the conflictual nature of this relationship which reveals the wonder of God, because she suffered greatly at Sarah’s hands and was cast out into the wilderness and yet remained unwavering in her faith. The Lord created wonders from her anguish (Pigott, 2018) and it easy to see how her story might give comfort to those seeking refuge.

Called Hajar in Islamic tradition, Hagar holds particular importance for Islamic people. While the Qur’an does not specifically address her story, it is through her that Muhammad’s lineage is traced and thus she is the matriarch of the bloodline which

provided Islam its prophet. Her story of exile and subsequent search for safety are central to the faith's main pilgrimage, the Hajj, and she provides a salient example of determination and strength in her mothering story (Upal, 2005). In fact, some academics have referred to her as both the "ultimate mother" as the founding mother of an entire nation and yet also the "ultimate other" as an outsider given that she is an Egyptian slave (Pigott, 2018). Her story is one of transformation, survival, and overcoming prescribed social roles (Rosen, 2013). Additionally, according to Islamic hadith, Hagar was saved in part due to the welcome of strangers (Admirand, 2014), which reminds us of the importance of cross-cultural roles in the reception of those who have been displaced.

An integral part of Hagar's story is the fact that she was given promises from God that were ordinarily given only to men, and Hebrew men at that. She, as a woman and an outsider, endured great difficulty but received great blessing as well (Pigott, 2018). Just as she relied on her faith in God to know that she and her son would be safe despite treacherous conditions in unknown lands, so too do our refugee women in their search for better and safer lives. Thus, the shared narrative of Hagar's life in Christian and Qur'anic traditions can become a starting point for recognition and compassion between Western Christian women and Syrian refugee women. Indeed, Hagar's story is often used in the context of promoting interfaith dialogue because it is so recognizable and powerful across multiple cultures (Rosen, 2013).

### *Miriam and Jochebed*

We also look to Miriam, Moses's sister, for guidance. Although she is not identified as a mother in Biblical texts, she still takes on an important role when viewed in the context of refugee resettlement and reception. In fact, it is precisely because she is

not identified by her motherhood status that we know she is important because other women mentioned in the Bible are rarely, if ever, discussed outside of marriage or motherhood roles (Reiss, 2010). Both the Bible and Qur'an document her efforts to help Moses by overseeing his journey down the river and ensuring access to a wet nurse for nourishment. Of course, this is not any wet nurse but his biological mother, Jochebed, and Miriam has used her cleverness to keep her family intact despite the context of forced separations (Wouk, 2013). Many refugee women become surrogate guardians to children due to various circumstances. Some may take over care of a child when their parents have died, some may find children separated from other family temporarily due to displacement, while others may watch over a child while in the refugee camp and have to separate when one or the other is resettled. Regardless of the circumstances, many refugee women are charged with taking care of someone else's child until they reach safety and thus can relate to this story. Conversely, they may also be in the position of being separated from their own child and therefore can relate to this story from that perspective as well.

Miriam's role runs deeper than this though, as she has a transactional role with the women around her and fosters collaboration between them that transcends race and religion through her interaction with the Egyptians (Wouk, 2013). She is credited with leading the Israelite women in praise and worship at Mount Sinai after their initial freedom and is hailed as a prophetess. She is known for maintaining a shared dialogue amongst the people and ushering them into deep spiritual experiences with God (Reiss, 2010). Thus, she can be viewed as a model for Christian women wanting to engage in supportive roles in interfaith settings. What stronger alliance and model of empathy could

today's cross-cultural interfaith women make than that which transcends the politics of refugee resettlement?

We cannot look at Miriam's protective role with her brother Moses without also addressing Jochebed, their mother. She too demonstrated strength and trust in God when she listened to Him and heeded the promise that if she sent her son down the river, he would be returned. Qur'anic accounts hold that she had a direct line of communication with God, and was divinely inspired (Ibrahim, 2015). Additionally, her narrative demonstrates a great display of courage in the midst of persecution and her motherhood role is exalted as being in high status because of the importance of her children's roles in religious events. She is known for bravery and a willingness to risk her life for the safety of her child (Zucker, 2017), which surely mirrors the experience of so many refugee women who risk their lives for their own children today. Together, these two women offer profound insights into the dangers women are willing to face in order to keep their loved ones safe despite persecution.

### *Mary*

The story of Mary is particularly relevant to both Christians and Muslims because of her connection as the mother of Jesus, who is considered divine in Christianity and a prophet in Islam. She provides a salient example of love, faith, and the importance of the mothering role. Through her story, we see significant examples of both joy and loss (Upal, 2005). Indeed, al-Natour et al. (2019) explains that some Syrian Muslim mothers felt connection to Mary in their suffering and expressed their sorrow as wanting to disappear or never having been born in the first place in order to avoid the difficulty of the refugee experience. The Qur'anic version of Jesus's birth tells of Mary (Maryam)

wishing that she had died before the experience because of the unbearable pain of labor, and one Syrian mother in a qualitative interview disclosed that she felt the same way about her refugee journey because of the difficulty she endured in the process of migration (al-Natour et al., 2019).

Indeed, Mary's motherhood journey was full of anguish and challenges. She had to accept that her child would have a different life than those around him from the beginning of her path as a mother. She had moments of self-doubt, guilt, and fear just as any modern mother today experiences. Her story reminds us that she was human and makes her experience therefore relatable to mothers throughout time. She shows a great deal of courage and resiliency when dealing with adversity (Barker, 2013), and it is in these traits especially that our Christian and Syrian women can find ways to approach discussions about their journeys and recognize their innate strengths, especially if everyone involved is also a mother.

It is important to pay particular attention to the fact that Mary was both an internally displaced person and a refugee, much like many of our Syrian women. Mary escaped to Egypt with her family because of the threat from King Herod on her son's life (Wright & Măcelaru), 2018). Keep in mind that refugees are given that status because of a "well-founded fear of persecution" as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2018), and the Holy Family's plight certainly falls within this definition. Additionally, when they are able to return and settle in Nazareth, Mary would still be considered internally displaced as this is not her original home and she is still unable to return due to issues with persecution (Wright, 2018). Christians may be able to understand how Mary felt in this situation as she tried to protect her child, and how they

might feel in a similar situation as well. They can then transfer these feelings of empathy when considering the Syrian refugee mothers – moments when they *connect with something in themselves* in order to *connect with them*. It is this type of personal reflection and shared recognition which can truly transform one’s viewpoint when addressing issues that may initially seem foreign.

Through these mother figures, we see tangible examples of survival, courage, and selflessness. Each woman we have glimpsed here has been placed in impossible situations and took great lengths to protect their children. Similarly, each narrative is applicable to the refugee experience because of the aspects of separation, isolation, and desperation. Yet in each story we also see God. Each woman perseveres through her difficulties and finds the promises that God made to them, and with this in mind we should honor the experience of each Syrian refugee woman and trust that she too will receive the blessings promised by God on her journey. Just as God never left the women in our stories, we can be sure He never left our Syrian women, either. It is incumbent upon us as Christian social work practitioners to see the Light of God in those we serve, especially the Syrian refugee women addressed herein so that, going forward, we can build upon the empathy and shared recognition to create a more just society.

### *Constructing Spaces*

These stories assist us with recognizing points of shared – and indeed sacred – connection, and in doing so also underscore the Christian value that we are all one human family because when we recognize sacred connections in those from other cultures, we should no longer accept the boundaries that separate us as valid. Now, we must address how to take action moving forward. Christian social workers are obligated to be

welcoming to refugees not only because of these Biblical directives but also because of the NASW Code of Ethics. In fact, NASW released a statement specific to the needs of Syrian refugees in 2015:

*The NASW Code of Ethics calls on social workers to act to prevent discrimination based on religion, race culture and other factors. Our Code of Ethics also calls on social workers to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, particularly people who suffer massive displacement due to wars and violent civil conflicts. NASW supports all efforts to provide a safe haven and support services for people fleeing the crisis in Syria (NASW, 2015).*

As you can see from the above example, the Christian social worker is bound by both faith directives and professional ethics to support Syrian refugees.

Following scripturally based directives, some may make the mistake of positioning refugees into places of “other” in society: outsider, foreigner, needy, helpless, stranger. Many people in the United States have forgotten that they, too, were once immigrants or strangers in this land, and therefore fail to connect to the plight of the refugee in meaningful ways. Often, the Christian-based focus is not on providing supportive assistance to the refugee but providing *salvation* for them (McKinnon, 2009). It would be wise to turn away from a Biblical perspective of the “needy alien” which has so often created the framework of organizational supports that place the worker in the role of aid-giver and the refugee in the role of passive recipient. Instead, the Christian social worker can aim to apply a scripturally based view of women as strong and capable

when working with Syrian women. By doing so, we can create egalitarian spaces in which the Christian social worker assists both the Syrian refugee women and women from the host country to co-create new models of support together. This truly holds the power to shift the narrative of refugee resettlement from needy or passive recipients to empowered community members building connections through models of empathy.

Some studies have indicated that just the term “refugee” can have stigmatizing effects, particularly for Syrian women (Alfadhli, 2018; Ozkaleli, 2018). This can create negative social mobility in the host country, but intentional shared social connections can have the opposite effect; that is, these connections can improve social and psychological well-being amongst Syrian refugee women (Alfadhli, 2018). Furthermore, Syrians dislike the international perception of refugees as being weak and needy, and thus it is important to focus on their strengths in order to preserve dignity (Mansour, 2018). This is especially true for women, who are often expected to take on the “traditional” role of stay-at-home mother and family caretaker, which may in turn cause these women to be viewed as uneducated or disempowered. Such a perspective does not take into account an intersectional approach which acknowledges that many Syrian women have good educations, have worked outside the home, and may feel frustrated when resettlement efforts are focused only on their male counterparts (Lokot, 2018). Therefore, interventions provided should focus on providing female-specific support in empowering settings.

As it is most culturally appropriate for Syrian women to receive support from other women, it makes sense for Christians supporting them to provide same-gendered support. With this in mind, Christian social workers can support Syrian refugee mothers

by creating groups for Christian mothers to provide direct interaction to their Syrian counterparts. Woman to woman, mother to mother, this shared mothering space built upon a foundation of empathy could just have the power to revitalize both of their worlds. These spaces should focus on cultural exchange, resource sharing, mother-child playgroups, and community engagement. As Arabic social gatherings often revolve around food and hospitality, the groups could regularly schedule potlucks and recipe exchanges but should be mindful not to include food gatherings during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when the faithful fast from sunup to sundown. Note that this date changes annually, so social workers should be aware of when this time period falls each year specifically. While the faith narratives such as those discussed above do not need to be at the center of the group's activities, regularly scheduled interfaith discussion meetings can provide opportunities for women to reflect upon their shared sacred connections and continue building empathy and recognition of ways these stories connect their cultures, values, and experiences. The Christian social worker, as the group facilitator, can use crossover stories such as the ones mentioned above to encourage productive group discussion and should utilize the four steps to building empathy - perspective taking, staying out of judgment, recognizing the emotion, and communication – (Brown, 2013<sub>b</sub>) to guide talking points.

Christian social workers can emphasize the shared connections between the women based on faith perspectives and can utilize their skills to promote empathy between everyone involved. They can apply the concept of “support circles,” common to both social work and Christian social support, as a model for the foundation of these groups. Support circles engage 5-10 community volunteers around vulnerable individuals

or families in need for a one-year period in order to uplift them and provide a social support net. However, the concept should be modified slightly for the purposes discussed herein. I recommend creating groups of no more than five Christian mothers and five Syrian refugee mothers with one social worker as a facilitator, while keeping the timeframe of a one-year commitment. It would be wise to have a bilingual English-Arabic speaking female co-facilitator, also a member of the Syrian community if possible, in order to ensure that translation needs are met as necessary so that language is not a barrier to connection.

It is important to note that the focus of these groups is not on skills training or charity support, but on shared connection and mutual relationship building. The goal is truly to foster a new social paradigm based on sacred connections between women in the community. Brown notes that in her research with women, creating empathy and connection also serves to provide insight into the universality of painful and isolating experiences, which in turn normalizes their feelings and builds resilience (Brown, 2006). These spaces should be matricentric (mother-centered) and focused on the empowerment of the Syrian refugee mothers engaged in them in order to support their full integration into our society. These groups can take place at many locations in the community: refugee resettlement agencies, social work offices, local restaurants with designated meeting space, or local places of worship. The Christian social worker should take great care to address power dynamics, and if a faith community is used as the setting, it would be advisable to rotate between a church and a masjid to ensure that there is not a unilateral and potentially oppressive Christian presence. This will also foster deeper interfaith understanding between both cultures. Meetings should be held weekly or

biweekly as participant schedules allow, but no fewer than once monthly in order to maintain regular connection between the participants. Undoubtedly, everyone involved in these groups will benefit greatly because, as Brené Brown notes, empathy moves us all to deeper and more meaningful relationships (Brown, 2007).

It is important for Christian social workers to acknowledge the transformative effect they are able to have on society. By creating these sacred spaces for women to connect, they are revolutionizing the way the world sees many issues: not only refugee resettlement but also interfaith discussions, Arab-U.S. relations, motherhood issues, and the power of women supporting women. All of these aspects are often overlooked in both society and policy, and small changes on the community level can have great impact. Direct action from Christian social workers will have a ripple effect throughout the larger community with regard to supporting Syrian refugee mothers after resettlement, and adopting the practices and considerations contained herein can change perceptions of those most vulnerable on many levels. Sacred connections are not just the dynamics of stories told from long ago, but rather connections that still exist and can continue to be created today, through the intentional building of empathy and strengthening of relationships. Creating these matricentric support circles for Christian women and Syrian refugee women to engage in this manner could indeed create sacred connections that may one day become the narratives which inspire future generations to improve the conditions of their world as well.

It is recommended that beyond the creation of these matricentric support circles, Christian social workers spend time reflecting on the stories of those provided here and share their insights with others in both their faith communities and professional networks

in order to create further understanding of the needs of Syrian refugee mothers. Additionally, those adopting the recommendations here should consider formally assessing and disseminating results from their support circles in order to enhance the scholarly knowledge surrounding this area. They can also build upon these ideas by adding their own insights to the discussion, preferably with the inclusion of the voices of Syrian refugee mothers to contain their perspectives as well. When we begin to see God in our struggles, and in the stories of those seeking refuge, and when we notice our shared humanity through our sacred connections and start to build empathy instead of barriers, miracles can happen. And those miracles are formed through our sacred connections and empathy towards one another. As Brené Brown said in *The Gifts of Imperfection*: “I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.” (Brown, 2010, p. 19). This concept can be a guiding force behind the group and its intentions: that those who gather within feel seen, heard, and valued without judgment, and grow stronger from their time together. May the initial connections established within these pages be the starting point for constructing spaces where empathy builds strength for both Syrian refugee mothers and their Christian counterparts.

Amen/Ameen<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The final two sentences in this article are intended by the author to be a form of interfaith prayer, as an acknowledgement that both research and social work can prayerfully contribute to improving interfaith relations. Utilizing both Amen and Ameen is inclusive of Christian and Islamic prayer in English and in Arabic.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Conclusion

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this dissertation research was to explore various aspects of the relationships between Syrian women with refugee status and resettlement workers in North Carolina, while gaining a deeper understanding of the social workers' perceptions of Syrian women and determining innovative ways to provide support as well. This research was borne out of necessity due to changes in the federal administration's refugee policies which affected the initial dissertation design and plans to inquire about the lives of Syrian women more directly. The subsequent design was, however, much stronger and more pertinent to the field of social work as it now takes a critical approach to understanding the roles of social workers in the resettlement journey. In a way, this dissertation exists as a form of resistance to those federal changes which excluded robust contact with Syrian women, and is a testimony to the ability of tenacious social workers to find creative ways to continue to advocate for the needs of the marginalized despite structural barriers intending to prevent such work.

Initially, the study design was intended to have heavy involvement from the Syrian population in order to more fully understand their lived experiences and to be able to incorporate their voices directly into the ever-growing body of research on this crisis, but multiple adversities warranted a complete design change to instead focus more on the social workers themselves. There were several unexpected hurdles to overcome; most

notably, policies of the Trump administration made accessing Syrian women challenging as this population is completely disallowed from entering the country at this time due to the executive order known as the “Muslim Ban” and the significant decrease in the refugee admissions ceiling. This placed a significant strain on refugee resettlement agencies which impacted their ability to assist in ways originally planned, such as outreach to potential participants and distribution of surveys. Another unexpected hurdle was the COVID-19 pandemic, which made the few additional in-person interviews impossible, and the women who had agreed to provide their stories did not have access to technology to engage via Zoom or other online platform.

There was one other surprising adversity which arose during the interview process and is important to mention. Some of the translators who had agreed to provide interpretation were already feeling overwhelmed by the stress of this time period and declined to provide interpretation based on their previous knowledge of trauma in the Syrian population, fearing that this would be too great of a burden while already under significant personal stress from both the pandemic and the sociopolitical strain of the government administration. They expressed a lack of confidence that they could handle hearing the stories, particularly since they felt a cultural and experiential affinity to these women as they were Islamic women from the Middle East as well. This is important for researchers to consider when using culturally similar interpreters (as is most appropriate), because the experience may be vicariously traumatizing for those doing the interpretation. Due to the culmination of all of these unexpected circumstances combined, there was limited direct involvement of Syrian women in this dissertation overall. This change altered the entire design of this dissertation and shifted the focus instead to social

workers and understanding the dynamics surrounding their perspectives of and support for Syrian women with refugee status. This focus proved to be an interesting gap in the literature which necessitates further understanding for future research and provides the pertinent reminder that social workers should regularly engage in critical self-reflection of potential biases in order to create ongoing commitment to ethical practice in the field.

### *Overview of Studies*

The lived experiences of two Syrian mothers, however, were included in the qualitative study (Chapter Two) which provided significant insight into the similarities and differences in perspectives of the resettlement process amongst Syrian women, resettlement workers, and state agency workers. Their stories and viewpoints highlighted areas where deeper understanding is needed, including ways that resettlement workers may contribute to stress levels through unintentional biases about Syrian wealth and need. The insight about potential mismatch in perspectives contributed to the desire to learn more about social workers' underlying perceptions of Syrian woman with refugee status and was part of the impetus for the survey design in Chapter Three. This study also confirmed known areas of concern, such as Medicaid issues, which can be problematic at multiple points along the resettlement chain. This information may be invaluable as a starting point for future research, and to inform North Carolina resettlement policy makers inquiries regarding the needs and perspectives of this population.

The quantitative study (Chapter Three) presented some intriguing findings from an exploratory survey of North Carolina social workers' views and understandings of this population. It highlighted the potential impact of political affiliation, understanding of federal policies, and perception of social biases against Syrians on their level of interest

in working with Syrian women. It demonstrated that regardless of these dynamics, social workers are eager to receive training on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status and they are *not* currently receiving this training in the workplace. This study provided key insight into areas for future research including the impact of a social worker's faith on their views and demonstrated that overall, social workers are fairly receptive to and supportive of Syrian women with refugee status – and equally supportive of the idea that there may be separate policies in place specifically for Syrian *mothers*.

These articles were rounded out with a conceptual article (Chapter Four) inviting social workers who self-identify as Christian to consider new ways to welcome Syrian mothers as they resettle into their new communities. While it may be useful for social workers who self-identify with any faith perspective, this chapter was specifically geared towards Christians as a means of encouraging critical reflection in a population which has recently expressed anti-refugee and anti-Syrian sentiments within its more conservative bases. Therefore, this chapter stands as a reminder for Christians of all denominations to remember that the tenets of our faith tell us unequivocally to welcome refugees.

Experts in the field of Christian social work note that community practice with intentional processes – such as the model for engagement provided in Chapter Four - is critical to ensuring that communities believe in the outcomes, and that this practice of intentional community outreach is rooted both in Scriptural directions and the profession's Code of Ethics (Brown & Yancey, 2020). With that in mind, this chapter guides the social work practitioner through structured community engagement designed to revolutionize the social welcome of Syrian mothers with refugee status. It provides an overview of the current Syrian crisis concerns and context for understanding the needs of

Syrian women with refugee status specifically. By encouraging active use of empathy and recognition of shared connection through stories of women in both Christian and Islamic sacred texts, this article creates a framework for improving reception in both practice and scholarship. And, as Edwards (2017) notes, empathy is directly connected to healing – particularly when related to issues of social justice and creating inclusive spaces.

Throughout this dissertation, there is a reflexive interplay between both social workers and Syrian women which encourages an introspective focus in praxis. These three chapters make up one overall comprehensive work because they each examine a different aspect of the relationship between social workers and Syrian women with refugee status and provide insight into potential ramifications for practice, policy, and academia. Together, the studies contained herein begin to fill a gap in the literature and add a little more insight into a complex concern regarding the most pressing refugee crisis in the world today.

#### *Dissemination Plan*

The qualitative article ‘Because they recognized us’ will be submitted to the *International Journal of Global Social Work*. It will also be submitted to an appropriately refugee-focused conference for presentation and discussion. If published, this paper will be shared across multiple social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and research hubs such as Research Gate. The information learned from this study will be presented to the North Carolina State Refugee Office in a formal presentation in order to allow leadership to inform their practice and policy with the knowledge therein.

The quantitative article ‘Perceptions of North Carolina social workers towards Syrian women with refugee status’ will be submitted to *Research on Social Work Practice*. It will be submitted for presentation the NASW-NC annual social work conference as well. If published, the paper will be shared across multiple social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and research hubs such as Research Gate. The information learned from this study will also be presented to the North Carolina State Refugee Office in a formal presentation in order to allow leadership to inform their practice and policy with the knowledge therein.

The conceptual article ‘Sacred connections: Using faith-based narratives to create matricentric empowerment spaces for Syrian refugee women’ has already been published in the *Journal of Social Work and Christianity*, in the Fall 2020 Special Issue. This was presented virtually at the 2020 NACSW conference in October 2020 as well. The article was shared across multiple social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn and research hubs such as Research Gate.

### *Strengths*

As a transnational feminist work, this dissertation looks at issues of power and privilege, political issues within the nation which affect global concerns, and provides critical self-reflection not only for individual social workers but for the profession as a whole – while reminding the reader of the importance of ensuring that Syrian needs, preferences, and cultural considerations are central to the policies and practices created regarding their journeys. As such, it provides the opportunity for social workers to consider the dynamics of oppression and bias from a newer perspective and reminds

social workers of the importance of the ethical obligation to engage in social and political action which seeks to promote justice (see Code of Ethics section 6.04). Transnational feminism is an excellent frame through which to view the intersections of Muslim-majority and non Muslim-majority societies relating to women's concerns (Fernandes, 2013), and this dissertation seeks to advocate for social justice for Syrian women with refugee status in a manner which promotes their increased agency and involvement in their own lives without the imposition of solely Western and Judeo-Christian thought from the social workers supporting them. It seeks to create a balance of power where Syrian women can co-create spaces in society while advocating for a deeper understanding of biases which social workers may hold towards them and the potential impact of these concerns on the women intended to be supported.

The social work profession requires critical self-analysis with regards to issues of power and oppression. According to Rozas & Gurran, (2016), the commitment to human rights must be assessed throughout all levels and fields of social work practice. In doing so, the social worker becomes the unit of measurement and thus individual social workers perspectives are important within a broader discussion of human rights within the field. Understanding the perspectives of individuals as they relate to human rights and anti-racist practices within policy and procedures can create a critical consciousness which elevates awareness of social justice issues within a disenfranchised group. It is important to inquire not only about individual perspectives but also institutional or agency ones as well (Rozas & Gurran, 2016). This dissertation accomplishes all of these tasks.

Additionally, the unique contributions offered to the field through this dissertation are significant strengths. While there are studies which inquire into the perspectives of

Syrian women and resettlement workers (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016), none were located which specifically triangulate the perspectives of Syrian mothers with refugee status along with both resettlement workers and state agency workers together as the qualitative article (Chapter Two) does. This holds the potential to frame issues in a new light for those creating policies and understanding concerns along the refugee resettlement chain. The quantitative article (Chapter Three) positions critical self-reflection in the field of social work as a necessary component of building cultural competency when working not only with Syrian women with refugee status, but with any Arab and Muslim populations as well. This is a pertinent reminder for the social work profession as a whole to continually be vigilant against bias and to intentionally include the perspectives of those marginalized not only into curriculum and policy, but at the forefront by ensuring that Arab and Muslim individuals are leading the impetus for change. Finally, the presentation of female-focused crossover texts in ‘Sacred Connections’ to build both empathy and community in female-focused refugee concerns is a novel contribution to the field and a powerful encouragement to be mindful that U.S. Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims have many common similarities upon which to build a solid foundation of trust.

### *Limitations*

There were several limitations to the studies in this dissertation. There was a paucity of literature addressing the specific dynamics between Syrian women with refugee status and social workers from which to draw and frame the understanding of these issues. There are studies in which the Syrian women’s views of resettlement workers are investigated (Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016), and a few studies in which the

view of resettlement workers towards refugees in general are examined (Hagues et al., 2019) but none to this researcher's knowledge which look at the relationship dynamic in the manner considered in this dissertation. While this is of course a strength by way of adding to knowledge, it is a limitation in terms of being able to assess what is already known with regards to these opportunities.

Another limitation was the smaller sample sizes for both the qualitative and the quantitative studies. The qualitative study consisted of six participants, and the quantitative study consisted of 181 participants. This makes the results non-generalizable to a wider portion of the population beyond those within the scope of these studies. A limitation to the qualitative study was that the Syrian participants resided in the same household and were together throughout the resettlement journey; having non-connected participants may have provided different outcomes. Additionally, while there was a lack of response from (or potential lack of) Muslim social workers in the quantitative study which created a vacuum, the study was able to show an analysis of the way Christian religious views impact social workers' perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status but further studies are needed to gather similar analyses with regards to the views of Muslim social workers towards this population.

### *Policy and Practice Implications*

There were several overarching takeaways from this dissertation research which hold the potential for change. First and foremost, there is a notable opportunity for not only increased understanding of Islamic and Arab needs in the field of social work, but there is the necessity for these perspectives to be infused into the profession itself. As Ragab (2016) notes, it is not enough for practitioners to have cultural competency but

rather they must be able to incorporate these views into practice when working with Arab and Muslim populations (Ragab, 2016). One takeaway from this research is that schools of social work should intentionally recruit Arab and Muslim students while ensuring that Arab and Muslim perspectives are taught throughout the coursework, employers should intentionally hire Arab and Muslim social workers, and policy makers should intentionally place the needs of this population at the forefront of considerations.

Experts in the field of social work have noted for many years that religion is particularly important to include in social work curriculum because of the salient nature of religion to the special populations targeted by the field. This is particularly necessary for policy courses to ensure that practitioners are well-equipped to understand the sociopolitical interactions with faith-based activities (Netting et al., 1990). However, as recently as 2016 only approximately 30% of MSW social work programs were offering courses on religion and spirituality – and even then, primarily as an elective. This leaves many social work practitioners unprepared to integrate religion and spirituality into their clients' treatment (Moffat & Oxhandler, 2018). Therefore, given the increase in Muslim clients in the U.S. at this time, it is imperative that social work schools now incorporate Islamic perspectives into their foundational courses in order to ensure that social work graduates are able to practice effectively with diverse populations such as Syrian women with refugee status. Indeed, this educational perspective has been noted as a particular area of salience in issues of social justice as education can unintentionally be utilized to further oppress marginalized populations, and must therefore be an area in which those who are marginalized are humanized through solidarity with their views instead of forced perspectives of dominant worldviews (Van Gorder, 2007).

Furthermore, social workers are very receptive to both incorporating training regarding the needs of and working with Syrian women with refugee status. The social workers who responded to the survey indicated that they want training on the needs of this population even though they are not working directly with Syrian women. It is noteworthy that most were likely to seek information on their own and were unlikely to receive training in the workplace. This is an important recognition about workplace trainings which should be addressed as social workers may encounter Syrian women without recognizing their refugee status (Diaconu et al., 2018) and should be adequately trained in order to provide competent services. Schools of social work can intentionally add trainings to their curriculum in order to create knowledge about this population from the onset of preparation for the field.

Additionally, it is necessary to continue including the voices of Syrian women in both practice and policy. Failing to include the experiences and perceptions of refugees is harmful to them as resulting policies and procedural changes do not include their voices (Zeno, 2017). One way to accomplish this is to create strategic channels for input from Syrian women with refugee status, such as through regular surveys or even advisory groups, which would help to ensure that their input is not only included in but a central focus of policy and procedural changes in all places where they are engaged.

### *Future Research*

More research is needed to understand the impact of faith and political views on social workers' perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status. Larger studies should be conducted with a more diverse range of participants, particularly an increased number of social work participants who identify as Muslim, in order to gain a deeper

understanding of the ways in which a practitioner's own faith perspectives may affect their practice with and views of Syrian women. Similarly, further understanding is needed of how social workers' political views affect their outlooks as well.

Furthermore, faith is an area to focus on in future research regarding its use as a resource for Syrian women. In the qualitative study, all participants felt that the Arab-Muslim community was a positive strength for those resettling here. More information is needed not only concerning the dynamics of support within this community, but also how the women utilize their faith and spirituality in general. Future studies should assess both biases and competencies regarding the views of social workers towards *Muslims* specifically, or their understanding of Arab and Islamic cultures. Finally, more informational depth would be helpful regarding the interplay of Christian and Muslim women in support circles as presented in the conceptual article, with note that the Syrian mothers who were interviewed felt that such welcome was beneficial to their social integration.

As the Muslim population in the United States continues to expand, social workers need to have a basic understanding of Islamic values to which their clients may adhere. Furthermore, the social work Code of Ethics requires social workers to have competence in issues of religion in order to meet their clients' diverse needs (Hodge, 2005; NASW, 2017). It is therefore necessary to have a baseline measure of current social workers' knowledge regarding issues pertaining to Arab and Muslim clients and understanding of ways that these worldviews may affect their clients' needs, priorities, and desires. Future research should focus on measuring social workers' knowledge of these concerns and determining where practitioners may need more education.

Additionally, there must be constant criticism of the ways in which sociopolitical processes affect policies and perspectives and how these processes in turn affect the provision of services to Syrian women with refugee status.

Continued, robust studies incorporating the lived experiences and perspectives of Syrian women with refugee status are imperative to improving the field of social work and refugee resettlement practices, in general, for these women and others like them. These should consist of qualitative, quantitative, and conceptual articles alike. Special attention should be paid to ensuring that the voices of Syrian women are included throughout as many studies as possible. Finally, because motherhood issues are an understudied area of focus, and because Syrian mothers with refugee status are more vulnerable than their childless counterparts (Vervliet et al., 2014; Asaf, 2017), future studies should incorporate the needs and perspectives of mothers in order to improve outcomes for this demographic (Ahmed et al, 2017). The social work profession has an opportunity to learn from its historical mistakes of attempting solely to acclimate refugees to the dominant White U.S. culture (Jani & Reisch, 2018) by instead adopting a transnational stance and adjusting society to meet the needs of Syrian refugees. Through recognition and celebration of their unique strengths and preferences, the field of social work can be a powerful force of supportive change when Syrians are once again allowed in the country. A continual focus on understanding and improving experiences throughout the refugee resettlement journey for Syrian mothers with refugee status is the pinnacle of social justice work with this population and must become a high priority for research going forwards.

## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Baylor IRB Pilot Study Approval



**BAYLOR**  
UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD — PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

#### **NOTICE OF EXEMPTION FROM IRB REVIEW**

Principal Investigator: Kayte Thomas  
Study Title: Pilot Study of Syrian Refugee Mother's Resettlement in the RDU Area  
IRB Reference #: 1325012  
Date of Determination: 10/08/2018  
Exemption Category: 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

---

The above referenced human subjects research project has been determined to be EXEMPT from review by the Baylor University Institutional Review Board (IRB) according to federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b):

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The following documents were reviewed:

- IRB Application, submitted on 09/20/2018
- Protocol, dated September 2018
- Consent Form, submitted on 10/08/2018
- North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Letter of Support, submitted on 09/20/2018
- Lutheran Services Carolinas Letter of Support, submitted on 09/20/2018

This exemption is limited to the activities described in the submitted materials. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your research is still eligible for exemption prior to implementing the modifications.

If you have any questions, please contact Deborah Holland at (254) 710-1438 or [Deborah\\_L\\_Holland@baylor.edu](mailto:Deborah_L_Holland@baylor.edu).

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH  
Assistant Vice Provost of Research  
Director of Compliance

---

OFFICE OF THE VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH

One Bear Place #97310 • Waco, TX 76798-7310 • (254) 710-3708 • FAX (254) 710-7309 • <http://www.baylor.edu/research/irb/>

## APPENDIX B

### Baylor IRB North Carolina Social Workers Study Approval



Baylor University

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD – PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH

#### **NOTICE OF EXEMPTION FROM IRB REVIEW**

Principal Investigator: Kayte Thomas  
Study Title: Assessing NC Social Worker's Perceptions of Syrian Women with Refugee Status  
IRB Reference #: 1605935  
Date of Determination: May 15, 2020  
Exemption Category: 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)

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The above referenced human subjects research project has been determined to be EXEMPT from review by the Baylor University Institutional Review Board (IRB) according to federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2): Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior.

The following documents were reviewed:

- IRB Application, submitted on 05/09/2020
- Protocol, dated May 2020
- Consent Form, dated 05/15/2020
- Social Media Recruitment Posts, submitted on 05/15/2020
- Recruitment Flyer, submitted on 05/09/2020

This exemption is limited to the activities described in the submitted materials. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your research is still eligible for exemption prior to implementing the modifications.

If you have any questions, please contact the office at (254) 710-3708 or [IRB@baylor.edu](mailto:IRB@baylor.edu)

Sincerely,

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH, CHRC, CHPC  
Assistant Vice Provost for Research, Research Compliance

# APPENDIX C

## NASW IRB North Carolina Social Workers Study Approval



### Institutional Review Board Research Application

This form is to be used when submitting a research application to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Institutional Review Board. All submissions must be sent electronically via email to IRB@socialworkers.org.

Please be sure to complete the full application. **Incomplete applications will not be reviewed.**

All applications must include the following attachments:

- copy of the university's/institution's IRB approval
- copy of the survey to be used including the statement "NASW does not endorse this study."

Only information on the application and requested attachments will be reviewed initially. Please do not send additional information/attachments. NASW will request more information if needed.

Date of request: *Rec'd 5/22/20 ccw*

#### Contact Information

Name: Kayte Thomas

Address:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

#### Information regarding the study

Name of Study: Assessing NC Social Workers' Perceptions of Syrian Women with Refugee Status

Purpose of study: The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how North Carolina social workers perceive Syrian women with refugee status.

Who will be studied? Social workers in North Carolina

Number of people to be studied: ~ 300

Is this study part of a dissertation? Y/N  Y

What institutions have granted IRB approval for this study?

Baylor University

Please explain the following in detail:

Informed Consent provision to participants:

Informed consent is included in the first page of the research survey. The participant clicks the "next" button to indicate that they are providing consent to continue the survey. This prevents the need to collect any identifying information and protects participants' privacy.

Confidentiality explanation to participants:

Please see confidentiality portion in attached survey as this form will not allow me to copy and paste. It is a standard university disclosure which states that no personal information is collected and data is kept secured on a password protected computer.

Risks to participants:

There are no expected risks to participants.

Time frame of study:

May 2020 - Sept 2020

What is your request from NASW?

I would like NASW to help me distribute this survey to social workers in North Carolina in order to maximize responses from the study population and have a more accurate snapshot of these social workers' perspective of Syrian women with refugee status.

By signing below, if NASW IRB approval is obtained, you agree to state clearly on the survey instructions that the institution named above and NASW has granted IRB approval as well as, state "NASW does not endorse this study."

Kayte Thomas

05/22/2020

Printed Name

Signature

Date

FOR NASW USE ONLY PLEASE DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE

Name of Applicant: Kayte Thomas

Title of Study: Assessing North Carolina Social Workers' Perceptions of Syrian Women with Refugee Status

NASW  Approves  Denies this request for dissemination by the NASW North Carolina Chapter.

Any changes made to this study requires further approval from the NASW IRB before they can be implemented in your study.

6/23/2020

Sharon Dietsche, LCSW, LGSW, ACSW, JCSW  
Senior Practice Associate/ IRB Chair  
National Association of Social Workers  
750 First Street, NE, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20002  
~~202-336-6266~~ 202-336-8388  
IRB@socialworkers.org

## APPENDIX D

### Semi-Structured Qualitative Pilot Interview Questions

#### *State/Local Agency Questions*

1. Can you tell me about how you got involved with refugee resettlement? How long have you been involved in this work?
2. Can you tell me about your role in the process?
3. What do you think are some of the major challenges and major successes that you've seen over the course of your work?
4. What are some of the concerns you have about the refugee program?
5. How do you define successful resettlement?
6. What are some of the ways you have seen people navigate adjustment post resettlement?
7. Is there anything that you would change about the refugee program or something you have a concern about?
8. Thinking about your current job. What is your favorite aspect of what you do now?
9. What has your involvement been with resettling Syrians?
10. When thinking specifically about Syrian women, what do you think would be important for someone like me to know?
11. Thinking specifically not just about Syrian women but then about Syrian mothers, is there anything that you notice about that particular population

either in terms of extra barriers or different strengths that they have compared to others?

12. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

### *Syrian Refugee Questions*

1. Can you tell me a little about how you came to the US?
2. How long did your journey take to arrive here? And how do you feel here compared to before?
3. Thinking back to before you came to the United States, what were your expectations about what it would be like here before you arrived?
4. Was the cultural orientation training helpful for you? What else set your expectations?
5. Was there anything that surprised you about coming to the United States?
6. Can you tell me a little about your resettlement experience once you arrived in North Carolina? What were the best aspects? What needed improvement?
7. What was the experience like at the local agency?
8. Were there any needs you had that were not met by your resettlement workers?
9. In what ways were your resettlement workers most helpful?
10. Can you tell me a bit about how you think the government policies may have affected you?
11. What would have been most helpful for you when you arrived, if you could change one thing about the experience?

12. What do you think has helped you adjust most to being here? What do you feel you still need?
13. How have you coped with starting a new life in a new country?
14. How would you define successful resettlement?
15. Thinking as a Syrian women, do you think there is anything that's different in your experience than the men? Is there anything that is different or harder or easier?
16. Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know?

## APPENDIX E

### North Carolina Social Worker Quantitative Survey Questions

We are interested in your experiences as a social worker in North Carolina. Specifically, we are interested in your interactions with and perceptions of Syrian women with refugee status. For the purposes of this survey, the UNHCR definition of refugee is utilized “*A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.*” Please select the answer to each question which corresponds most closely with your experiences. You will have an opportunity to provide further explanation at the end of the survey. Thank you for your participation.

1. Please select your highest level of social work credential
  - a. BSW
  - b. MSW
  - c. LCSW/LISW/LMSW
  - d. PhD (Social Work)/DSW
  - e. Other
  - f. I don't have a social work degree
  
2. How many years have you been practicing social work? (fill in the blank)
  
3. Overall, how many years of experience have you had working with Syrian refugee women? (fill in the blank)
  
4. Please select your primary field of practice
  - a. Academia/Higher Education
  - b. Community Organizing
  - c. Gerontology
  - d. Hospice/Palliative Care
  - e. Medical/Hospital Services
  - f. Mental Health
  - g. Refugee Resettlement
  - h. School Social Work
  - i. Social Services
  - j. Substance Use Treatment
  - k. Veteran Support
  - l. Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please rate your level of interest in working with Syrian women with refugee status (regardless of if you currently engage with this population at your place of employment)

Very disinterested      slightly disinterested      neither interested nor disinterested  
slightly interested      very interested

6. Thinking of your current place of employment, how frequently do you engage with Syrian women with refugee status?

Daily    1-3x per week    Several times each month    Every other month    A  
few times per year    Never

7. Thinking of your current place of employment, how confident are you in the agency's ability to meet the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?

Very unconfident    slightly unconfident    neither confident nor unconfident  
slightly confident    very confident

7a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

8. How confident are you in your level of cultural competency with regards to the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?

Very unconfident    slightly unconfident    neither confident nor unconfident  
slightly confident    very confident

9. Thinking of your level of cultural competency with Syrian women with refugee status, where did you receive the training/information from? (Check all that apply)

Workplace trainings  
Continuing education  
Learned during course of degree study  
Sought information on my own  
Personal experience  
Social media  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your awareness of any special practices which Syrian women with refugee status might need, for example understanding various cultural norms for women?

Very unaware    slightly unaware    neither aware nor unaware    slightly  
aware    very aware

10a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

11. What is your awareness of any special practices which Syrian women with refugee status might need, for example specific protocols after the birth of a child?

Very unaware      slightly unaware      neither aware nor unaware      slightly aware      very aware

11a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

12. How interested are you in receiving training specifically on the needs of Syrian women with refugee status?

Very disinterested      slightly disinterested      neither interested nor disinterested  
slightly interested      very interested

13. What topics would be most beneficial for you to learn about regarding the needs of Syrian women with refugee status? (fill in the blank)

14. If there were professional guidelines in place specifically to support Syrian women with refugee status, how supportive would you be of them?

Very unsupportive      slightly unsupportive      neither supportive nor unsupportive  
slightly supportive      very supportive

15. If there were professional guidelines in place specifically to support Syrian mothers with refugee status, how supportive would you be of them?

Very unsupportive      slightly unsupportive      neither supportive nor unsupportive  
slightly supportive      very supportive

16. Do you feel there is a fear of or bias against Syrian women with refugee status in your community?

Yes      No

16a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

17. Do you believe this has changed since the 2016 presidential election?

Yes, I think that the fear or bias against Syrian refugee women has increased  
Yes, I think that the fear or bias against Syrian refugee women has decreased  
No, I think that the fear or bias against Syrian refugee women has remained the same  
No, I do not think there is fear or bias against Syrian refugee women

17a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

18. Is your overall perception of Syrian women with refugee status positive or negative?

Very negative      slightly negative      neither positive nor negative      slightly positive      very positive

18a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

19. Which words do you believe best describe Syrian women with refugee status? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Resilient
- b. Brave
- c. Trustworthy
- d. Sassy
- e. Needy
- f. Unfortunate

20. Has your personal view changed since the 2016 presidential election?

My perception of Syrian refugee women has worsened

My perception of Syrian refugee women has improved

My perception of Syrian refugee women has remained the same

20a. Please expand on your response to Q#20.

21. Have you heard of the policy termed the “Muslim Ban”?

Yes No

22. If so, how would you explain the “Muslim Ban” in your own words?

23. If you have heard of the “Muslim Ban”, what is your perception of this policy?

I do not feel that it is fair

I do not have strong feelings about it one way or another

I feel that it is necessary or in our national best interests

N/A – I have not heard of the Muslim Ban.

23a. Please briefly explain your response to Q#28.

24. Are you supportive of the U.S. welcoming Syrian women with refugee status?

Yes No

25. What is your faith tradition?

Agnostic/Atheist Buddhist Christian Hindu Jewish Muslim Other

\_\_\_\_\_

26. Do you feel that welcoming Syrian women with refugee status into your community falls in line with the perspectives of your faith tradition?

Yes No

26a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

27. Do you feel that providing social work services to Syrian women with refugee status falls in line with the perspectives of your faith tradition?

Yes No

27a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

28. Do you feel that there is a difference between your personal and professional views towards Syrian women with refugee status?

Yes      No

28a. Subquestion in Qualtrics: Please explain text box

29. In which region of North Carolina do you practice?

Western    Southwestern    Triad    Triangle    Southeastern    Eastern

30. What is your current age range?

18-24    25-34    35-44    45-54    55+

31. What is your gender?

Male    Female    Nonbinary    Other

32. With which political party do you identify?

Democrat    Republican    Independent    Other \_\_\_\_\_

33. What else would you like to share regarding practice with Syrian women with refugee status that has not been asked on this survey?

## APPENDIX F

### Publisher Permission



January 4, 2021

To Whom it May Concern,

Kayte Thomas submitted a manuscript entitled “Sacred Connections: Using Faith-Based Narratives to Create Matricentric Empowerment Spaces for Syrian Refugee Women”. This manuscript was accepted and published in NACSW’s journal *Social Work & Christianity*. The work was contained in a special issue focused on Community and Community Practice in the fall of 2020. The DOI for the work is 10.34043/swcv47i3.79. NACSW is pleased to give permission for this work to be utilized as part of her dissertation presentation.

Sincerely,

*Jane Hoyt-Oliver, LISW-Supv., Ph.D.*

Jane Hoyt-Oliver, LISW-Supv., Ph.D.  
Editor in Chief, *Social Work & Christianity*

Cc: Rick Chamiec-Case, Managing Editor, *Social Work & Christianity*

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