GENDERED AND INTERSECTIONAL IMPACTS OF DISPLACEMENT: SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES OF INTERGENERATIONAL KAREN REFUGEE WOMEN IN LONDON, ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines how refugee integration is experienced, negotiated, and redefined through the everyday experiences of Karen women across generations. I address a critical gap in dominant integration frameworks, which privilege individual, outcome-based indicators—such as employment and language acquisition—while overlooking gendered, relational, and intergenerational dimensions of settlement. I also respond to the limited attention given to refugee women's experiences and to the often-overlooked role of youth agency in shaping family and community integration. Guided by three research questions, I explore how gender, age, migration history, and family roles shape the settlement experiences of Karen mothers and daughters; how integration is experienced and interpreted across generations; and how young women contribute to and mediate integration within family contexts. I draw on qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eleven first-generation Karen refugee women in London, Ontario—six who arrived in Canada as adults and five as teenagers, some of whom were born in refugee camps and later resettled from Thai–Myanmar border camps through the Government-Assisted Refugee Program. I adopt a feminist methodological approach grounded in intersectionality (Crenshaw, Collins, and Hynie) and matricentric feminism (O'Reilly), and I analyze the data using thematic analysis. My findings show that integration is neither linear nor neutral. It unfolds as an ongoing and uneven process shaped by caregiving responsibilities, displacement histories, and structural constraints. Adult-arrival mothers navigate settlement through caregiving and family stabilization, while younger women take on roles as cultural mediators, translators, and facilitators of family integration. Across both generations, integration emerges as multidimensional labour—emotional, cultural, linguistic, and intergenerational—much of which remains unrecognized in policy frameworks. I introduce the concept of relational care-based integration to reconceptualize integration as a collective, gendered, and interdependent process grounded in everyday practices of care and cultural continuity. I also argue for decentering dominant models through refugee epistemologies of integration, which foreground refugee women's own meanings and practices of belonging. This study contributes to a more nuanced and equitable understanding of integration and calls for greater recognition of the often-unseen labour that sustains settlement and community formation after displacement.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the loving memory of my late parents, **U Sanny Hla** and **Daw Tin Aye**. My father was Kachin heritage, and my mother of Bamar heritage, and I carry their legacy with great pride as their daughter. This PhD journey has been carried with their presence in my heart, as I continue to hold onto the confidence and pride they placed in me. Although they are no longer physically here, their love and belief in me remain a constant source of strength and guidance. I miss them deeply and hold them in my heart with love and gratitude.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BVOR	Blended Visa Office-Referred
DVD	Digital Versatile Disc
ESL	English as a Second Language
EYRP	Early Years Refugee Project
GAR	Government-Assisted Refugee
IRCC	Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
KED	Karen Education Department
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KNU	Karen National Union
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
KRC-EE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
KSNG	Karen Student Network Group
KWO	Karen Women's Organization
KYO	Karen Youth Organization
LINC	Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada
MOI	Ministry of Interior
NGO	Non-Government Organization
PSR	Privately Sponsored Refugee
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RAP	Resettlement Assistance Program
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VCD	Video Compact Disc

CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I introduce my study by situating the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women within the broader historical, sociopolitical, and scholarly contexts of displacement and resettlement. In Section 1.2, I provide background and context on the Karen people, outlining their histories of displacement from Myanmar and subsequent resettlement in Canada, with particular attention to how these experiences shape contemporary settlement processes.

In Section 1.3, I locate the research problem by identifying key gaps in existing scholarship on refugee integration. I highlight the limitations of outcome-based frameworks and the insufficient attention to gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee experiences. Building on these gaps, I advance the central argument of this dissertation: that refugee integration cannot be adequately understood as an individual or outcome-based process, but must instead be conceptualized as relational, gendered, and intergenerational, shaped through everyday practices of caregiving, cultural transmission, and community engagement.

Section 1.4 presents the research questions that guide this study, followed by Section 1.5, which outlines the corresponding research objectives. Together, these sections frame the analytical focus on how Karen refugee women across generations experience, interpret, and shape integration in Canada.

In Section 1.6, I introduce the theoretical approach, drawing on intersectionality, Black feminist thought, matricentric feminism, and relational approaches to refugee integration to examine how power, agency, and lived experience intersect in shaping settlement processes. Section 1.7 outlines the research methodology, including the qualitative design, participant selection, and thematic analysis used to explore the experiences of eleven first-generation Karen refugee women in London, Ontario. Section 1.8 then defines the scope and significance of the study, highlighting its contributions to feminist and intersectional migration scholarship and to policy discussions on more inclusive, culturally responsive approaches to refugee integration.

Finally, Section 1.9 addresses the study's limitations, and Section 1.10 provides an overview of the dissertation’s overall structure. Together, these sections establish the conceptual,

empirical, and methodological foundation for examining how displacement, gender, and generation intersect in shaping the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in Canada.

1.2 Background and Context

In this dissertation, I situate the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women within the historical and sociopolitical context of displacement from Myanmar and subsequent resettlement in Canada. Karen, a large Southeast Asian ethnic group, originated in the Gobi Desert, Mongolia, or Tibet, and settled in Burma/Myanmar's southern Irrawaddy Delta and eastern Myanmar, as well as neighbouring Thailand. In the past, various groups were regarded as subgroups of the Karen: Pwo Karen, Sgaw Karen, Kayahs (also known as Karenni), Pa-Os, and Kayans (also known as Padaung). Now, all these respective groups consider themselves distinct ethnic groups, and the two major Karen groups (Sgaw and Pwo) live in several regions of southern and eastern Burma and call their homeland “Kaw Thoo Lei” (Karen Women’s Organization).

Karen communities are characterized by religious diversity, including Theravada Buddhism, animism, and Christianity. Many Pwo and Sgaw Karen are Buddhist or Animist, with a significant population of Christians, including Baptists, and smaller numbers of Seventh-day Adventists and Catholics. Animists believe in helpful female guardian spirits, local spirits, and beneficial and malicious ghosts. Christians emphasize Bible study and prayer services with hymn singing (Karen Women’s Organization). Missionary activities in the late nineteenth century led to significant conversion to Christianity, particularly the Baptist denomination (MacLaren et al. 65). According to the Karen Buddhist Dhutta Foundation (2011), approximately seventy percent of the Karen population adhere to Buddhist or animist traditions, while twenty to thirty percent identify as Christians, a group often perceived to be more formally educated (qtd. in MacLaren et al. 65). Most Karen people live in rural areas, where traditional livelihoods are centered on subsistence agriculture, particularly rice and cotton cultivation (MacLaren et al. 65).

Prior to displacement, Karen social organization was structured around village life, kinship relations, and gendered divisions of labour. Karen women played a central role in both domestic and productive activities, including agricultural work and textile production. As documented by Marshall (1922), women were actively involved in cultivating cotton, processing materials, and producing garments for household use (qtd. in Mantel 111). Weaving, typically learned between adolescence and early adulthood, functioned not only as a practical skill but also as a cultural and

moral practice associated with femininity, discipline, and social identity (Mantel 110–113). These practices were embedded in broader social structures in which women's roles were highly valued, as Infomekong (2008) notes, citing accounts that describe Karen society as matrilineal, in which women's opinions are respected, and the head spirit of a clan is always a woman. In contrast, the husband is considered part of his wife's clan upon marriage (qtd. in Neiman et al.).

British colonization in Burma in the 19th century affected many ethnic groups, including the Karen, leading to contact with American and European Christian missionaries and recruitment into the British police and armed forces. During World War II, the Karen became loyal guerrilla fighters for the Allies against the Japanese occupiers. Following Burma's independence in 1948, Karen demands for political autonomy were not fulfilled, leading to armed resistance by the Karen National Union (KNU). Subsequent military regimes carried out systematic campaigns of violence, including forced labour, land confiscation, and village destruction, which forced many Karen to flee their homes (South 54–60; Karen Women's Organization). As a result, large numbers of Karen were displaced internally and across borders, particularly into Thailand, making the Karen conflict one of the longest-running armed struggles in the world. Consequently, Karen social and cultural systems were profoundly disrupted by prolonged conflict and state violence.

Because Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, refugees from Myanmar have been treated as undocumented migrants and confined to camps, leading to protracted exile conditions. Most refugees in Thailand are from the Karen ethnic group (79.1%), constituting one of Myanmar's eight major national-ethnic groups (Burrows 2). In 1995, the Burmese army launched major offensives against the Karen National Union (KNU) government-in-exile, forcing many Karen to flee. About 140,000 Karen refugees were settled in nine remote camps along the Thai-Burma border until the Thai government and the UNHCR reached an agreement in 2005 to resettle all of them (MacLaren et al. 64, 66). These camps, initially established as temporary shelters, evolved into long-term settlements characterized by restricted mobility and dependence on humanitarian assistance.

A significant shift in the Karen refugee experience occurred with the implementation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Third Country Resettlement Programme in the mid-2000s. Between 2005 and 2007, approximately 50,000 Karen refugees were resettled in countries including Australia, Canada, and the United States (Mantel 103). Canada's resettlement program accepted 810 Karen refugees in 2005 and later committed to accepting

approximately two thousand more (Government of Canada). Among these, 208 individuals were resettled in London, Ontario, while others were placed in cities such as Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton (Erdogan 17).

Although resettlement provided safety and new opportunities, it also introduced challenges related to language acquisition, employment, housing, and cultural adjustment. Existing studies indicate that Karen refugees often face structural barriers, including limited formal education, precarious labour market participation, and difficulties accessing services due to language constraints (Marchbank et al. 7; Ewen 62–68; MacLaren et al. 69–70). At the same time, Karen communities draw on collective strategies rooted in kinship, religion, and community networks to navigate settlement and sustain cultural identity (Gilhooly and Lynn 806–809; Smith et al. 106–109). Despite this growing body of research, Karen refugees are frequently treated as a homogeneous group, with limited attention to differences shaped by gender and generation. In particular, the ways in which women's roles as caregivers, cultural transmitters, and community members intersect with age at arrival and migration history remain underexplored. Building on this context, my dissertation focuses on Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, to examine how displacement, gender, and generation intersect in shaping settlement experiences and understandings of belonging.

1.3 Locating the Problem in Refugee Integration

The research problem my study aims to address is framed by three interrelated themes emerging from existing scholarship on refugee integration: the limitations of dominant integration frameworks, the insufficient attention to the gendered and intersectional experiences of refugee women, and the underexamined role of intergenerational and youth agency in shaping integration processes.

First, a central problem lies in how refugee integration is conceptualized and measured within policy and academic frameworks. Existing models, particularly those emphasizing economic participation, language acquisition, and social integration, tend to rely on outcome-driven indicators that obscure the structural conditions shaping refugees' lived experiences. As Hynie argues, such approaches reduce integration to functional benchmarks while overlooking how access to employment, housing, healthcare, and education is structured by institutional and policy environments rather than individual effort alone ("Refugee Integration" 265–67). Although

widely used frameworks such as Ager and Strang's ten-domain model provide useful analytical categories, their application often prioritizes measurable outcomes over relational and context-specific dimensions of integration. Consequently, integration is frequently treated as a linear, individualized process rather than a dynamic, relational, and context-dependent phenomenon shaped by social inclusion, institutional responsiveness, and uneven starting conditions (Hynie, From the Outside In 321–24). This conceptual limitation risks misrepresenting refugee experiences by attributing unequal outcomes to individual shortcomings rather than to structural inequalities embedded within settlement systems.

Second, the literature reveals a significant gap in understanding the gendered and intersectional dimensions of refugee integration. While scholarship increasingly acknowledges that refugee women experience displacement and resettlement differently from men, these differences are often treated as secondary rather than constitutive of integration processes. Research demonstrates that women's experiences are shaped by caregiving responsibilities, gendered labour expectations, exposure to gender-based violence, and unequal access to health and social services (Phillimore 585–86). These factors intersect with broader social positions such as race, class, migration history, religion, and legal status, producing differentiated experiences of exclusion and belonging. Intersectional analyses highlight that integration cannot be understood as a uniform trajectory, as women navigate layered forms of vulnerability and constraint across pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases (Crenshaw 1244–47; Ashbourne et al. 115). However, despite these insights, much of the existing research continues to focus on structural barriers or policy outcomes without fully examining how women interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to these experiences in their everyday lives. As a result, women's roles as caregivers, cultural transmitters, and agents of family and community stability remain under-theorized within dominant integration frameworks.

Third, the literature identifies a critical gap in the analysis of intergenerational dynamics and youth agency in refugee integration. Although recent studies have begun to recognize refugee youth as active contributors rather than passive dependents, their roles are often insufficiently theorized, particularly in relation to gender. Research shows that young refugees frequently act as cultural brokers, translators, and mediators between

families and institutions, contributing significantly to family adaptation and access to services (Shields and Lujan 20; Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 14). These responsibilities are not evenly

distributed; young women often assume disproportionate emotional, linguistic, and caregiving labour within families, yet this work remains largely invisible within policy and academic discourse. While existing scholarship acknowledges youth resilience and adaptability, it rarely examines how these forms of agency are shaped by gendered expectations, intergenerational relationships, and cultural obligations. Furthermore, the affective dimensions of this labour—such as stress, responsibility, identity negotiation, and relational tension—remain insufficiently explored, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how integration is experienced and enacted within families (Gyan et al. 3–5; Shields and Lujan 12).

Taken together, these interrelated gaps demonstrate that current approaches to refugee integration are insufficient for capturing the complexity of refugee women's lived experiences, particularly in contexts shaped by protracted displacement and resettlement. Existing frameworks tend to prioritize structural indicators, overlook gendered and intersectional realities, and marginalize intergenerational and relational forms of agency that are central to everyday settlement processes. In the context of Karen refugee studies in Canada, these limitations are further reflected in a body of research that, while offering valuable insights into structural barriers and community-based resilience, often approaches Karen refugees as a relatively homogeneous group.

Existing studies document challenges such as limited literacy, precarious employment, housing insecurity, language constraints, and ongoing psychological distress shaped by prolonged displacement (Marchbank et al. 7, 22–23; Ewen 62–68; Clark 231–233; Erdoğan 238–243), while also emphasizing collective coping strategies rooted in kinship networks, churches, and community self-organization (Gilhooly and Lynn 806–809; Smith et al. 106–109). However, this literature pays limited attention to how settlement experiences are differentiated by gender and generation. While studies such as Clark (2015) and Erdoğan (2012) examine trauma, language barriers, and identity reconstruction, they do not fully explore how caregiving roles, gendered expectations, and intergenerational responsibilities intersect to produce distinct settlement trajectories among women at different life stages.

In addition, existing research has largely focused on major urban centres such as Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Toronto (Hynie; Marchbank et al.; Ewen; Smith; Clark), leaving mid-sized cities, such as London, Ontario, underexamined, particularly in relation to women and girl refugees. This geographic limitation restricts understanding of how local settlement infrastructures and community networks shape everyday experiences of belonging across contexts. Furthermore,

although Karen women's agency is often observed through practices such as informal support networks, community leadership, and cultural continuity, it is rarely theorized through an intersectional feminist framework that situates these practices within broader structures of power, including displacement, patriarchy, race, and class.

My dissertation, *Gendered and Intersectional Impacts of Displacement: Settlement Experiences of Intergenerational Karen Refugee Women in London, Ontario*, directly addresses these gaps by focusing on Karen refugee women in London, Ontario and examining how displacement, gender, and generation intersect in shaping settlement experiences. Building on an intersectional and feminist framework, the study reconceptualizes integration as a relational, culturally embedded, and intergenerational process, foregrounding women's everyday practices of caregiving, cultural transmission, and community engagement as central to understanding how integration is lived and negotiated in resettlement contexts.

My dissertation argues that refugee integration cannot be adequately understood through outcome-based or individualistic frameworks, but must instead be conceptualized as a relational, gendered, and intergenerational process shaped by the enduring effects of displacement and the everyday practices through which refugees negotiate belonging. Focusing on Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, my study demonstrates that integration is not simply a matter of economic participation or institutional adaptation, but is actively produced through women's caregiving labour, cultural transmission, and community engagement across generations. By examining how displacement, gender, and age at arrival intersect to structure distinct settlement trajectories, this research reconceptualizes integration as a dynamic process of meaning-making and social reproduction, in which refugee women are not passive recipients of support but central agents in shaping family stability, community cohesion, and long-term belonging in the resettlement context.

1.4 Research Questions

Building on the conceptual and empirical gaps identified in the preceding section, this study is guided by the following research questions, which examine the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in Canada:

1. What are the gendered and intersectional impacts of displacement and resettlement on Karen refugee women and girls, and how do Karen mothers and daughters navigate

adversities in the settlement process? How are gender roles perceived and negotiated across generations?

2. How do Karen refugee women in Canada, across two generations, differently experience, interpret, and shape integration processes?
3. To what extent do young Karen refugee women contribute to the integration process, and how do they navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their parents and families?

These questions are designed to move beyond dominant outcome-based understandings of integration by foregrounding the everyday experiences, relational practices, and forms of agency through which Karen refugee women negotiate settlement. By focusing on both older and younger generations, this study examines how age at arrival, family roles, and life-course positions shape distinct pathways of integration. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how integration is experienced, interpreted, and actively produced within families and communities, rather than simply measured through institutional indicators.

1.5 Research Objectives

Building on the research questions outlined above, my study aims to examine the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in Canada. Specifically, the objectives of this dissertation are:

1. To analyze the gendered and intersectional impacts of displacement and resettlement on Karen refugee women and girls, with particular attention to how factors such as age, migration history, language ability, and family roles shape their settlement experiences.
2. To examine how Karen refugee women across two generations experience, interpret, and shape integration processes, focusing on how age at arrival and life-course position influence their perceptions of belonging, identity, and "successful settlement."
3. To investigate the role of young Karen refugee women in the integration process and how they engage with and navigate resettlement challenges within family and community contexts.

Together, these objectives aim to move beyond dominant, outcome-based approaches to refugee integration by conceptualizing integration as a relational, gendered, and intergenerational process shaped by everyday practices and lived experiences.

1.6 Theoretical Approach

This dissertation adopts an intersectional and feminist theoretical approach to examine the gendered, relational, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in Canada. Rather than conceptualizing integration as a linear or outcome-based process, I frame it as a dynamic and socially embedded phenomenon shaped by intersecting structures of power, including gender, age, ethnicity, migration history, and language. This approach enables a critical examination of how integration is experienced, negotiated, and produced through everyday practices of care, belonging, and community engagement.

At the core of this study is the framework of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and further extended through Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the matrix of domination. These frameworks provide analytical tools to examine how multiple and interlocking systems of power—such as gender, race, class, and migration status—shape refugee women's lived experiences across structural, cultural, and interpersonal domains. By adopting this lens, I analyze how Karen refugee women's settlement experiences are not shaped by single categories of identity but by the interaction of multiple social positions, producing differentiated forms of constraint, marginalization, and agency.

My study also draws on matricentric feminism, particularly the work of Andrea O'Reilly, to foreground mothering as a socially constructed and politically significant practice. Matricentric feminism conceptualizes mothering not as a private or natural role, but as a form of gendered labour shaped by intersecting systems of patriarchy, race, class, and migration. Within this framework, maternal practices—such as caregiving, cultural transmission, and intergenerational support—are understood as critical sites where oppression and agency coexist. This perspective is particularly important for analyzing refugee women's lives, where mothering often functions as both a survival strategy and a form of resistance within contexts of displacement and resettlement. By centering motherwork, this study challenges dominant integration models that overlook or devalue caregiving as a meaningful contribution to settlement.

In addition, this dissertation is informed by relational and decentered approaches to refugee integration, particularly the work of Michaela Hynie, which critiques assimilationist and outcome-driven models. Hynie conceptualizes integration as an intersectional and relational process shaped by institutional structures, social environments, and subjective experiences of belonging. This perspective shifts the focus away from individual achievement toward the broader conditions that

enable or constrain refugees' participation in society, including institutional responsiveness, social inclusion, and cultural recognition. It also emphasizes that integration is ongoing and negotiated, rather than a fixed endpoint, aligning with this study's focus on everyday practices and lived experiences.

Bringing these frameworks together, my dissertation conceptualizes refugee integration as a relational, gendered, and intergenerational process that is actively produced through everyday practices within families and communities. By integrating intersectionality, the matrix of domination, matricentric feminism, and decentered integration, this study foregrounds refugee women's lived experiences and situated knowledge as central to understanding settlement. This theoretical approach enables a more nuanced analysis of how Karen refugee women interpret, negotiate, and reshape integration, while also highlighting the structural constraints that condition these processes. In doing so, it advances a critical and feminist rethinking of refugee integration that centers care, belonging, and agency as foundational to settlement and social life.

1.7 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in Canada. Guided by an interpretive and feminist methodological approach, the research prioritizes participants' lived experiences, situated knowledge, and everyday practices as central sources of understanding. This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how refugee women interpret, negotiate, and give meaning to settlement processes within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The empirical component of this study is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Karen refugee women residing in London, Ontario. Specifically, the study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in summer 2024 with 11 first-generation Karen refugee women, including 6 who arrived in Canada as adults and 5 who arrived as teenagers; some participants were born in refugee camps. Participants were purposefully selected to reflect two generational groups: women who arrived in Canada as adults with caregiving responsibilities, and women who arrived as children or adolescents and have since navigated settlement across different life stages. This intergenerational design allows for a comparative analysis of how age at arrival, family roles, and life-course position shape distinct experiences of displacement, adaptation, and belonging. Given the linguistic diversity within the Karen community, a bilingual interview assistant was engaged

to conduct interviews and translate them when needed. Eight participants completed interviews in English, while three spoke in Karen. All participants gave informed consent, and the study received ethical approval from York University's Office of Research Ethics. To protect participant confidentiality, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Data collection consisted of two components. First, a demographic and background questionnaire was used to gather information on participants' migration histories, family composition, education, employment, and initial settlement experiences. The second part featured semi-structured questions exploring key aspects of their resettlement journeys, including family-related stressors, gendered responsibilities, integration challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of "successful settlement." This two-part design enabled both contextual grounding and in-depth exploration of lived experiences (these questions are provided at the end of my thesis under the "Appendix" section)

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke. This method involves familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review and refinement, and interpretation. An inductive approach was employed to allow themes to emerge from participants' narratives, while also engaging with the study's theoretical framework to interpret patterns related to intersectionality, gendered labour, and intergenerational dynamics. Particular attention was given to how participants articulated experiences of constraint, resilience, and agency across different stages of settlement.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process, given the potential vulnerabilities associated with refugee experiences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying details. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity to participants' comfort and well-being, particularly when discussing experiences of displacement, trauma, or marginalization. The study also recognizes the importance of reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and its influence on the research process, interpretation, and representation of participants' voices. Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced and contextually grounded analysis of Karen refugee women's settlement experiences. By centering qualitative, feminist, and intersectional methods, the study seeks to amplify participants' perspectives and to capture the relational and lived dimensions of integration that are often overlooked in dominant, outcome-based research frameworks.

1.8 Scope and Significance

The study focuses on the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, with particular attention to gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of integration. Drawing on qualitative data from first-generation Karen women across two generational groups—those who arrived as adults and those who arrived as children or adolescents—the research examines how displacement, family roles, and age at arrival shape distinct pathways of adaptation and belonging. While the study is geographically situated in a mid-sized Canadian city, its analytical focus extends beyond local context to contribute to broader debates on refugee integration, gender, and migration.

The scope of this research is intentionally focused on women's experiences within family and community contexts, particularly caregiving, cultural transmission, and intergenerational relationships. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive account of all dimensions of refugee integration, nor does it generalize findings to all refugee populations. Eligibility of the participants was (i) they must be older than 25 and must be first-generation refugee women who relocated to Canada under the Government-assisted Refugee Program from Thai-Myanmar border refugee camps; (ii) Their marital status must be married or common-in-law, and they must have been in Canada for more than five years; and (iii) They must be living with their immediate family members such as spouses and children. The study does not include recently arrived Karen refugee women who are still navigating initial settlement procedures. Rather, by focusing on a specific community and adopting an in-depth qualitative approach, the study seeks to generate nuanced, contextually grounded insights into how integration is experienced and negotiated in everyday life. This focus allows me to examine in detail forms of labour and agency—especially those related to care and relational practices—that are often overlooked in dominant, outcome-based models of integration.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both scholarly and policy-oriented understandings of refugee integration. First, it advances feminist and intersectional migration scholarship by foregrounding the experiences of Karen refugee women, a group that remains underrepresented in Canadian research. By examining how gender, generation, and migration history intersect, the study challenges homogenizing representations of refugees and highlights the diversity of settlement trajectories within a single community. Second, it contributes to theoretical debates by reconceptualizing integration as a relational, intergenerational, and culturally

embedded process, rather than a linear progression measured through economic or institutional indicators. In doing so, it brings together intersectionality, matricentric feminism, and decentered integration frameworks to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how belonging is constructed and sustained.

Third, this study has practical relevance for policy and community practice. By demonstrating how caregiving, cultural continuity, and community-based support function as central components of integration, it highlights the limitations of policies that prioritize rapid labour market participation and language acquisition without addressing structural and gendered constraints. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive, gender-responsive settlement approaches that recognize refugee women's contributions beyond economic productivity and support culturally appropriate services, including language access, childcare, and community-based programs.

Finally, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to center refugee voices and lived experiences within academic and policy discourse. By drawing on participants' narratives, it positions Karen refugee women not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents who interpret, negotiate, and shape their settlement experiences. In doing so, the study responds to calls for more participatory and reflexive approaches in migration research and affirms the importance of situating knowledge within the lived realities of displaced communities.

1.9 Limitations

While this study provides in-depth insights into the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in Canada, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a relatively small, qualitative sample of eleven participants residing in London, Ontario. Although this approach allows for rich, detailed exploration of lived experiences, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all Karen refugee populations or to other refugee groups in different geographical contexts.

Second, the study focuses exclusively on first-generation Karen refugee women aged twenty-five and older who have lived in Canada for more than five years and are currently residing with immediate family members. While the inclusion of two intergenerational cohorts—women who arrived as adults and those who arrived as children or adolescents—allows for meaningful life-course comparison, the findings remain limited to these groups and do not capture other

settlement trajectories. As a result, the experiences of recently arrived refugees, single women, or those with different family arrangements are not included. These groups may face distinct challenges and trajectories that fall outside the scope of this research.

Third, participant recruitment was facilitated through community networks, particularly those connected to church-based institutions. Although no religious criteria were imposed, all participants who agreed to take part in the study identified as either Baptist or Catholic and were engaged in church-related or community-based activities. This reflects the central role of churches as key sites of social organization and support within the Karen refugee community. At the same time, it suggests that the sample is shaped by these networks, which may limit the representation of Karen women who are not involved in church-based or faith-centred community structures.

Fourth, the reliance on retrospective accounts means that participants' narratives are shaped by memory, interpretation, and subsequent experiences of settlement. While such reflections are valuable for understanding meaning-making processes, they may not fully capture the immediacy or complexity of earlier stages of resettlement.

Finally, as with all qualitative research, the interpretation of data is influenced by the researcher's positionality and analytical framework. Although reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, the findings remain shaped by the researcher's perspective and theoretical orientation.

Despite these limitations, the study makes important contributions by offering a nuanced and contextually grounded analysis of Karen refugee women's settlement experiences. By centering gender, intergenerational dynamics, and lived experience, it addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship on the resettlement of minority refugee women within culturally grounded family contexts. The findings highlight how Karen women's perceptions of integration are shaped by life-course position, cultural continuity, and mothering responsibilities—dimensions that are often overlooked in dominant, outcome-based settlement frameworks.

1.10 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into eight chapters, each contributing to the overall examination of the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in Canada.

Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining the research background and context, identifying key gaps in existing scholarship, and presenting the research questions, objectives, theoretical approach, and methodological overview. It also establishes the study's scope, significance, and limitations.

Chapter 2 provides the historical and sociopolitical context of Karen displacement and resettlement. It traces the origins of the Karen people, the impact of prolonged conflict and forced migration from Myanmar, and the conditions of refugee camp life along the Thailand–Myanmar border. The chapter also examines the transition from protracted displacement to third-country resettlement, with particular attention to the Canadian context.

Chapter 3 reviews existing literature on refugee integration, gendered settlement experiences, and intergenerational dynamics. It critically examines dominant integration frameworks and highlights key gaps related to gender, intersectionality, and youth agency, which inform the focus of this study.

Chapter 4 presents the theoretical framework, drawing on intersectionality, Black feminist thought, matricentric feminism, and decentered integration. It develops a conceptual foundation for analyzing how power, gender, and social relations shape refugee women's lived experiences, while foregrounding caregiving and cultural practices as central to integration.

Chapter 5 outlines the research methodology, including the qualitative research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and thematic analysis. It also addresses ethical considerations and the researcher's positionality.

Chapter 6 presents empirical findings, organized around key themes emerging from participants' narratives. It examines the gendered and intergenerational dimensions of settlement, including caregiving responsibilities, cultural transmission, identity negotiation, and perceptions of successful integration.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the existing literature. It interprets how Karen refugee women's experiences challenge dominant models of integration and demonstrates how integration is enacted through relational, gendered, and intergenerational practices.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation by summarizing the main findings, highlighting theoretical and empirical contributions, and discussing implications for policy, practice, and future

research. It reflects on how the study advances a more inclusive and relational understanding of refugee integration.

CHAPTER TWO

Displacement and Resettlement of the Karen: Historical and Sociopolitical Context

2.1 Chapter Overview

The displacement and resettlement of the Karen people represent one of the longest and most complex refugee experiences in Southeast Asia, marked by intersecting histories of colonial legacies, ethnic persecution, protracted displacement, and transnational mobility. Over seven decades of armed conflict between the Karen National Union (KNU) and successive Burmese regimes have resulted in large-scale internal displacement and cross-border exile, most notably along the Thai–Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) border. Within these shifting geopolitical and humanitarian landscapes, the Karen have reconstituted their communities through enduring forms of resilience, faith, and cultural reproduction. This chapter traces the historical and sociopolitical contexts of Karen displacement, camp life, and resettlement in Canada, while analyzing how gender, generation, and transnational connections shape their lived experiences of belonging and adaptation.

Building on feminist and intersectional scholarship in forced migration studies, specifically, I examine how structural violence, gendered division of labour, and cultural reproduction inform Karen refugees' trajectories from rural Burma to Thai border camps and, eventually, to Canada. Sections 2.2 through 2.4 contextualize the historical roots of displacement and the transformation of refugee camps into spaces of social reproduction, where Karen communities cultivated collective survival strategies and cultural memory amid conditions of precarity. Sections 2.5 and 2.6 explore how homemaking, gender roles, and education were renegotiated in exile, foregrounding the agency of Karen women who transformed domestic and subsistence practices into modes of empowerment and resistance. Section 2.7 examines the UNHCR's Third Country Resettlement Programme (2005–2007) as a critical turning point in the Karen refugee trajectory, tracing Canada's coordinated group resettlement of Karen refugees from Thai border camps to various Canadian cities.

The final section 2.8 focuses on the resettlement of Karen refugees in Canada, where collective resilience continues to mediate integration amid linguistic, economic, and structural barriers. Drawing on key studies by Marchbank et al., Ewen, Smith et al., Clark, and Erdoğan, I synthesize existing knowledge about Karen refugees' adaptation across Canadian cities—

particularly Vancouver, Saskatoon, Toronto, and London, Ontario—while identifying critical gaps in gendered and intergenerational analysis. The conclusion (2.9) situates these gaps within the broader field of refugee and diaspora studies, outlining how my dissertation—*Gendered and Intersectional Impacts of Displacement: Settlement Experiences of Intergenerational Karen Refugee Women in London, Ontario*—advances the literature through its intersectional, feminist, and empirically grounded investigation of Karen women's experiences of settlement, care, and identity formation across generations.

Through this analysis, the chapter underscores that Karen displacement and resettlement are not merely humanitarian or migratory processes but deeply gendered and transnational social transformations, in which displaced women and families continuously reconstruct their senses of home, belonging, and agency across geopolitical and cultural borders.

2.2 Background of the Karen People: Historical and Cultural

According to MacLaren et al., the Karen people are broadly categorized into three regional groups: Southern (Sgaw and Pwo Karen), Central (Karenni), and Northern (Pa-O). Their languages, which derive from the Sino-Tibetan family, are generally not mutually intelligible. The Karen are believed to have migrated from Tibet before settling in lower Burma and the highland regions along the Burma–Thailand border. It is estimated that more than 400,000 Thai citizens are of Karen descent. In the late nineteenth century, missionary activities led many Karen to convert from Buddhism and animism to Christianity, particularly to the Baptist denomination (MacLaren et al. 65). Data from the Karen Buddhist Dhutta Foundation (2011) indicate that approximately 70 percent of the Karen population adhere to Theravada Buddhism, Buddhist-animist, or animist beliefs, while the remaining 20–30 percent identify as Christians, a group often regarded as the most educated within Karen society (qtd. in MacLaren et al. 65). Furthermore, around 70 percent of the Karen population reside in rural areas, where traditional livelihoods are primarily based on subsistence or high-subsistence farming (MacLaren et al. 65).

Traditionally, the majority of Karen people engage in rice and cotton cultivation and reside in forested villages. Their bamboo-and-thatch houses are typically situated near streams or rivers, which provide water for bathing, washing, and drinking. Karen women are widely regarded as "hard workers," as their gendered labour extends beyond domestic responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare. Both men and women participate in agricultural work; notably,

women play a central role in cotton cultivation—tending plants, harvesting bolls, and processing cotton to produce garments, blankets, and traditional attire for their families (Marshal, 1922, qtd. in Mantel 111). Although men are regarded as honourable figures within the household, Karen culture has been described as matriarchal: women's opinions are highly respected, the clan's head spirit is always female, and upon marriage, the husband becomes part of his wife's clan (Infomekong 2008, qtd. in Neiman et al.).

Prior to displacement, Karen women's lives were structured around gendered divisions of labour that intertwined economic productivity, cultural transmission, and moral identity. As Marshall discussed, Karen women were characteristically "hard-workers," participating actively in agricultural labour such as planting, tending, and harvesting cotton before processing it at home into garments, blankets, and traditional clothing for their families (Marshall, 1922, qtd. in Mantel 104). From adolescence, girls typically learned to weave between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, acquiring the skill informally from parents, kin, and peers. Weaving functioned as both a practical and symbolic act—a cultural marker of femininity and moral development that signified a "good" adolescent girl, while its continuation into adulthood represented the virtues of a devoted mother and wife. Practiced at night after household duties were completed, weaving exemplified discipline, endurance, and commitment to familial and communal well-being. Beyond its domestic and economic significance, weaving embodied a deeply gendered form of cultural continuity and self-education. As Mantel explains, the practice was not only a means of subsistence but also a gendered expression of tradition, belonging, and identity formation, reflecting women's aspirations for knowledge and self-improvement in contexts where formal education was either inaccessible or prohibitively expensive (Mantel 107–113).

Thus, weaving represented a locus where gender, culture, and epistemology converged—women's embodied labour serving both to preserve heritage and as an informal mode of learning. However, these deeply rooted practices were disrupted by the systematic persecution of the Karen by the Burmese state army, including land confiscation, forced labour, and gendered violence, which compelled them to abandon their ancestral villages and reconstruct their lives across borders (Smith 1). In this sense, the cultural significance of weaving and women's agricultural labour must be understood not only as traditional markers of Karen womanhood but also as resilient strategies of survival and identity preservation amid displacement.

2.3 Displacement of Karen People

The displacement of the Karen people from Myanmar constitutes one of the most protracted refugee crises in Southeast Asia, rooted in the enduring legacies of colonialism, militarization, and ethnic persecution. Emerging from centuries of marginalization, Karen displacement reflects the intersection of political conflict and structural violence sustained over successive regimes. During British colonization in the nineteenth century, Karen men were recruited into the colonial police and armed forces and later allied with the British during World War II in hopes of securing political autonomy. However, when Britain granted Burma independence in 1948, these aspirations were unfulfilled; the Karen, anticipating a separate state, were instead incorporated into the newly formed Union of Burma. In response, the Karen National Union (KNU) initiated an armed rebellion in 1949 to demand self-determination, but repeated military offensives and the 1962 coup entrenched the Burmese military's authoritarian control (MacLaren et al. 65–66; South 59–60; Lang 11, 25).

Ashley South conceptualizes forced migration in Myanmar as a multi-layered phenomenon comprising "armed conflict-induced," "state–society conflict-induced," and "livelihood vulnerability-induced" displacement (South 55–57). These intersecting processes underscore both the direct impacts of militarized violence and the structural forces—such as land confiscation, forced labour, and development-driven displacement—that perpetuate chronic insecurity. By 2005, an estimated 540,000 internally displaced persons were living in eastern Myanmar, concentrated across Karen and neighbouring states. The Burmese military's strategy of forced relocation functioned not only as counterinsurgency but also as a mechanism of territorial and population control (South 58–59).

Lang situates this long-term displacement within the geopolitical context of the Thai–Myanmar borderlands. She notes that Thailand's 2,401-kilometre border has historically operated as both a refuge and a containment zone for civilians escaping Myanmar's internal wars. The establishment of semi-permanent refugee camps in 1984 followed intensified Tatmadaw counterinsurgency campaigns. By 2000, over 120,000 refugees—primarily Karen and Karenni—were confined to nine camps along the border (Lang 11–12). Thailand's policy of "temporary asylum" prevented mass refoulement but simultaneously denied refugees legal status and freedom of movement, producing what Lang terms a condition of "fear and sanctuary," where safety remained provisional and displacement became institutionalized (Lang 18–19).

Because Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, refugees from Burma are legally classified as undocumented migrants and thus restricted to camp confinement, resulting in protracted exile. The majority of these refugees are Karen, who constitute approximately 79.1 percent of the total refugee population and represent one of Myanmar's eight major national-ethnic groups (Burrows 2). In 1995, renewed offensives by the Burmese army against the KNU government-in-exile triggered another large-scale exodus. Approximately 140,000 Karen refugees ultimately settled in nine remote camps along the Thai–Burma border, where they remained until the Thai government and UNHCR implemented a resettlement program in 2005 (MacLaren et al. 64, 66). According to Smith et al., the Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps housed Karen civilians who fled successive Burmese military assaults characterized by forced labour, village burnings, and mass killings. Many families endured decades of encampment under conditions of isolation, restricted mobility, and limited access to formal education or skills training (Smith et al. 101–102).

2.4 Protracted Refugee Situations and Camp Life

By the 1990s, the displacement of the Karen people had evolved into one of Southeast Asia's most enduring *protracted refugee situations*, as ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar precluded return and Thailand's restrictive border regime curtailed durable solutions. The UNHCR defines such contexts as cases in which refugees remain in exile for over five years without prospects for voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement (Protracted Refugee Situations 5). Along the Thai–Myanmar border, camps such as Mae La, Umpiem Mai, Mae La Oon, and Mae Ra Ma Luang—identified by Lang as principal Karen refugee sites—gradually transformed from emergency shelters into semi-permanent settlements characterized by prolonged aid dependency, limited mobility, and institutionalized humanitarian governance (Lang 81–82, 84, 126). As Lang observes, these encampments developed structured systems of education, health, and community life, marking a shift from temporary relief to long-term social organization (Lang 81–84).

The refugee experience within these borderlands, however, extended beyond physical displacement to encompass pervasive insecurity, trauma, and loss. Smith et al. document that families were frequently separated for decades and that camp residents endured recurrent natural disasters—including landslides and flooding—that resulted in numerous deaths and chronic

instability (102). Such precarious living conditions entrenched psychological and material vulnerability, reinforcing the sense of temporality that defines protracted exile.

However, as Horstmann argues, these camps also emerged as *socio-political and cultural spaces* where displacement paradoxically enabled the reconstruction of Karen ethno-national identity and civil society. Institutions such as the Karen National Union (KNU), the Karen Refugee Committee, and the Karen Education Department reconstituted systems of governance, welfare, and schooling in exile (Horstmann 39–40). Through these structures, the camps evolved from zones of humanitarian containment into arenas of political continuity and cultural reproduction. Education, religion, and social organization became central to sustaining collective identity and asserting autonomy within the constraints of camp life.

Faith-based institutions—particularly churches and Christian schools—played a pivotal role in this transformation. They functioned not only as moral and spiritual centers but also as nodes connecting local refugee communities with transnational Christian and humanitarian networks that bolstered both material survival and emotional resilience (Horstmann 41–44). In this way, the Karen refugee camps exemplify what Horstmann terms a *"revitalization from below"*—a grassroots process through which displaced communities mobilized religion, education, and cross-border solidarity to preserve cultural continuity, assert self-determination, and redefine nationalism under conditions of protracted exile (Horstmann 48–50). This revitalization also took the form of remaking homes, reforming Karen communities and diasporic identities in exile.

2.6 Remaking Homes and Identities in Exile

Sara Ahmed, in *"Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,"* conceptualizes *home* through three registers: "home is where one usually lives; home is where one's family lives, or home is one's native country" (340). Yet she complicates this notion by acknowledging that (i) one's native country may not always feel like home and (ii) individuals may inhabit multiple homes under different circumstances (338). Ahmed's reflections are particularly resonant for the Karen people, whose experiences of war, displacement, and exile unsettle the presumed unity between homeland and belonging. Historically, as Harriden (2002) and Smith (1999) note, hostility between the Karen and the Burmese army intensified in the early nineteenth century (qtd. in Gilhooly and Lynn 801). As discussed in section 2.2, during British rule, especially during World War II, the Karen supported the British, while the Burmese nationalists aligned with the Japanese. When

Britain negotiated Burma's independence after the war, the Karen sought political autonomy and established the Karen National Union (KNU) in 1947. However, Britain reneged on its earlier assurances, and the newly independent Burmese state in 1948 excluded Karen demands for self-determination (Neiman et al. *"Karen Cultural Profile"*).

Following independence, ethnic minorities—including the Karen—faced decades of persecution manifested through forced labour, sexual violence, conscription, and the destruction of villages, amounting to state-sanctioned acts of atrocity (Malseed, 2008; Milbrandt, 2012; Pedersen, 2011; Rogers, 2004; South, 2011; qtd. in Gilhooly and Lynn 801). Consequently, many Karen came to regard their homeland not as a site of safety but as one of fear and subjugation under Burma's militarized regime. The Karen's struggle for an independent state persisted for more than 60 years, resulting in both internal displacement and a mass exodus into Thailand (Gilhooly and Lynn 801). In this context, Ahmed's argument that "home is not simply about fantasies of belonging […] but is sentimentalized as a space of belonging" (341) illuminates the Karen experience of *re-making home* in exile—an affective and material process of reconstructing belonging within precarious environments.

For Karen refugees, home-making in exile operates through two interrelated dimensions: (i) the reconstruction of *material-cultural practices* that transform provisional shelters into meaningful spaces, and (ii) the re-imagining of *home as lived locality*, embodying both physical settlement and political identity (Smith 1, 5; Ahmed 341). These processes reflect the dynamic interplay between displacement, cultural continuity, and the pursuit of dignity under conditions of structural marginalization. As Horstmann (47) and Chung-Chi (225) note, the Karen's engagement with home is simultaneously practical and symbolic, intertwining ethnonationalism, spirituality, and the affective longing for stability and security.

Thailand's refusal to accede to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol left Karen refugees with limited rights and freedoms, classifying them as undocumented migrants confined to camps. The geopolitics of home-making along the Thai–Myanmar border thus merge the struggle for physical survival with the reconstitution of political identity. Within these constrained spaces, Karen refugees mobilized their cultural and social practices to create livable environments. Smith's ethnographic account describes how displaced families arriving from Burma—often destitute, undernourished, and without clothing—had to register with the UNHCR to receive food aid and a plot of land, a process that could take months (Smith 1–3). While awaiting

registration, families shared overcrowded huts under precarious conditions. Smith recounts the story of Aye, a displaced woman who, despite vermin-infested surroundings, minimal privacy, and scant resources, constructed a rudimentary shelter using only a straw mat and blanket. These materials, though materially insignificant, became imbued with symbolic value, enabling her to claim a small sense of security and personhood (Smith 4).

Smith's findings underscore that home-making in exile requires more than material construction—it involves negotiation of access, resources, and legality. Refugees who were allocated plots received minimal supplies such as bamboo poles, twine, and tarpaulins, yet scarcity forced them to procure additional materials illegally from surrounding conservation areas, risking arrest and imprisonment (Smith 4–5). Bamboo, wood, and other basic materials thus acquired moral and political weight: they were the means through which refugees enacted agency within restrictive humanitarian regimes. As Aye's experience illustrates, home construction in exile becomes a *performative act of survival*, shaped by displacement and cross-border precarity (Smith 4–5).

Constructing a home in these camps was also an achievement within regulatory constraints. For many Karen households in the Mae La camps, housing remained temporary by design—built not as permanent dwellings but as "provisional sites" of existence within a political system that excluded them from Thai society (Smith 4–5). Nevertheless, such efforts reflect the refugees' resilience and desire to preserve dignity through domestic order. Even within transience, they sought stability, asserting control over limited spaces to sustain everyday life and political hope. As Horstmann observes, refugees transformed camp environments into human and festive spaces, maintaining traditional practices and social values despite their marginal status (Horstmann 47).

For example, the architecture of Karen camps often mirrored traditional village layouts, incorporating meeting halls, gardens, and places of worship. Communities named their zones or churches, asserting moral cohesion and collective identity (Horstmann 47). Through this remaking of *"the lived experience of locality"* (Ahmed 341), Karen refugees differentiated their camps from other global refugee sites, expressing a form of *positive ethnonationalism* that affirmed belonging and self-worth (Horstmann 47; Chung-Chi 225). Although the Karen national flags were prohibited, refugees symbolically reclaimed identity by painting flag emblems on walls and displaying them during festivals (Chung-Chi 225).

Religion further anchored this reconstruction of home and identity. In the camps of Chiang Mai, Baptists and other Christian denominations collectively re-interpreted scripture through a Karen lens, linking religious practice to cultural preservation and futurity (Horstmann 49–50). Mass baptisms—sometimes involving over 500 participants—were communal events uniting pastors, teachers, and missionaries in festive ceremonies that transformed the camps into Christian public spaces. These gatherings operated across social, cultural, and political registers, reinforcing transnational solidarities between refugees and diaspora communities (Horstmann 49–50). In the absence of durable political solutions, such transnational religious networks sustained hope and revitalized collective identity, enabling refugees to endure protracted displacement while envisioning a better future.

2.6 Reforming Karen Communities and Diasporic Identities in Exile

As discussed in the previous section, Karen refugees transformed their temporary settlements in exile into spaces of empowerment, cultivating collective social, cultural, and political identities that distinguished their camps from other refugee contexts worldwide. In this sense, the refugee camp became a distinctly *Karen space*—a locus for reproducing community and diasporic identity beyond the boundaries of the homeland. The consolidation of these identities depended on both internal communal relationships and extensive transnational linkages with external actors, including non-Karen organizations and international networks.

Drawing from Anh Hua's theorization in *"Diaspora and Cultural Memory,"* the concept of *diaspora* historically refers to "communities that have been dispersed reluctantly, dislocated by slavery, pogrom, genocide, coercion and expulsion, war in conflict zones, indentured labour, economic migration, political exile, or refugee exodus" (193). Hua's definition closely aligns with the Karen experience, whose displacement was precipitated by armed conflict and systematic persecution by the Burmese military regime. She further observes that diasporic subjects often experience alienation in host societies due to socio-economic and political exclusion, yet resist marginalization by reviving, recreating, and inventing artistic, linguistic, religious, and political practices that sustain transnational exchanges among dispersed populations (193). This conceptual framing is evident in the ways Karen refugees have rebuilt their civil, cultural, and political institutions in exile.

For instance, the construction of *civil society in exile* emerged as a central political strategy among Karen refugees. Through the formation of various associations with distinct administrative responsibilities, Karen organizations addressed immediate community needs while simultaneously communicating the human rights abuses of the Burmese state to international audiences. These non-military initiatives—such as political coalitions with other ethnic nationalities and advocacy campaigns for human rights—demonstrate what Lavie and Swedenburg (1996) term the dual function of diaspora: maintaining "connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with back home" (qtd. in Hua 195). For instance, the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRC-EE) sustains Karen language and culture through camp-based schooling, while the Karen Education Department (KED) promotes anti-violence education (MacLaren et al. 66). In addition, the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) documents abuse and disseminates reports through newsletters, DVDs, and VCDs, generating international attention and solidarity for the Karen cause (Chung-chi 205).

Gendered agency has also become integral to the reconstruction of Karen civil and political life in exile. As Mantei notes, many Karen women engage in weaving through NGO-supported income-generating programs, transforming a traditional domestic craft into an economic strategy that supplements household income rather than merely fulfilling familial obligations (114–115). These woven goods circulate in external markets, including the Thai tourism industry, linking refugee women's labour to broader transnational economies. At the organizational level, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) has prioritized advocacy on childcare and gender-based violence, aligning its agenda with that of the Karen National Union (KNU) and reinforcing women's leadership within the public sphere (Horstmann 41). The KWO also collaborates with the Karen Youth Organization (KYO), the Karen Student Network Group (KSNG), and other NGOs to address issues affecting youth and women (MacLaren et al. 66; Chung-chi 225). Through these collaborations, Karen women and youth have played pivotal roles in shaping diasporic identity, collective empowerment, and intergenerational continuity.

Hua, however, cautions against romanticized narratives of diaspora that idealize the homeland as an "authentic" site of belonging and depict settlement spaces as "inauthentic" or undesirable (195). This critique is particularly relevant to theorizing the Karen diaspora, both in Thailand and in later resettlement contexts such as Canada. For many Karen refugees, exile is not simply a state of loss but an opportunity to construct autonomous social and political systems

outside the homeland. The refugee camps in Thailand—administered under the Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI)—function as hybrid spaces of humanitarian governance and local self-determination. Although the MOI retains ultimate jurisdiction, it tacitly shares administrative responsibilities with the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), thereby enabling the transformation of the camps into semi-autonomous "Karen spaces" (Chung-chi 223). The KRC collaborates with the UNHCR and multiple NGOs, coordinating tasks ranging from security, administration, and legal adjudication to the registration of new arrivals and the distribution of food supplies from the Thai-Burma Border Consortium (Kengkunchorn 2006, qtd. in Chung-chi 223).

These institutional collaborations demonstrate the refugees' capacity to operate a *parallel system of governance*—a hybrid humanitarian-administrative model where the KRC partners with Christian aid consortia to manage substantial budgets and ensure the welfare of approximately 140,000 refugees along the Thai-Burma border (Horstmann 42, 44). The camps thus function as both humanitarian and political arenas, where refugees negotiate sovereignty, belonging, and identity through localized governance. Building upon these dynamics, Horstmann identifies how Karen refugees reconstitute their communities as *Christian public spaces*, integrating religious practice with political and cultural expression. Within these spaces, humanitarian aid, moral order, and nationalist sentiment intersect. Through collective worship, education, and public celebrations, refugees enact a "refugee nationalism" that mobilizes faith-based and humanitarian resources to sustain their communities and articulate a moral vision of nationhood in exile (Horstmann 51). This ethnonationalism—defensive yet generative—operates as a coping mechanism within protracted displacement, reinforcing solidarity, agency, and transnational belonging.

In sum, the reformulation of Karen communities and diasporic identities in exile can be understood through three interrelated strategies: (i) the formation of civil society and local governance structures in exile; (ii) the articulation of gendered and generational agency through organizations such as the KWO and KYO; and (iii) the cultivation of cohesion and collective empowerment through ethnonationalist and faith-based networks. These interdependent practices exemplify how Karen refugees transform displacement into a dynamic process of *diasporic world-making*—sustaining community, culture, and political life beyond the boundaries of the homeland through both internal solidarity and transnational support from humanitarian and Christian networks. Building on the reformation of Karen civil society and diasporic institutions in exile, the

following section examines how gender roles, family structures, and education were transformed within the context of protracted displacement along the Thai–Myanmar border.

2.7 Gender Roles, Family Structures, and Education in Long-Term Displacement

Following displacement, traditional gendered skills among the Karen were reconfigured within the socio-economic realities of refugee camps along the Thai–Myanmar border. As Mantel explains, weaving, formerly a domestic craft symbolizing moral womanhood and cultural belonging, was transformed into a means of survival and self-reliance in exile (110–112). Within the camps, weaving projects initiated by Karen women and later institutionalized through NGO income-generation programs provided modest income, restored dignity, and sustained cultural continuity amid uncertainty. Women organized collective weaving groups that functioned simultaneously as livelihood initiatives and social pedagogies, transmitting cultural knowledge, discipline, and aesthetic sensibilities to younger generations born or raised in camps (Mantel 114–115).

At the same time, displacement altered the meanings attached to weaving. What had once been an intimate, household-based evening activity became a public and communal practice, entangled with humanitarian economies and the politics of aid distribution. Mantel observes that these weaving programs not only preserved cultural identity and supported subsistence but also fostered solidarity and new friendships among women navigating prolonged displacement (Mantel 114–115). Thus, weaving exemplifies how gendered labour persisted as a site of agency, resilience, and cultural reproduction, enabling Karen women to negotiate structural constraints and reconstitute belonging within humanitarian settings.

Prolonged militarization and displacement further reshaped gender roles, family hierarchies, and leadership within Karen society. As the Burmese military expanded control over rural areas, men—frequently targeted for arrest, forced labour, or execution—were rendered absent or unable to serve as community leaders. Women consequently assumed responsibilities for leadership, caregiving, and coordination to sustain collective life (KWO 1–3, 9–11). The *Karen Women's Organization* (KWO), in its 2010 report *Walking Amongst Sharp Knives*, documents testimonies from ninety-five women who served as village chiefs in militarized zones and refugee camps. Many assumed leadership after male relatives were killed or displaced, enduring torture, rape, and intimidation while mediating between the military and their communities (KWO 1–2, 13–16). The report characterizes their daily existence as "walking between sharp knives,"

capturing both the precarity and the moral agency of women's leadership under militarized patriarchy. These narratives reveal that displacement, while a site of suffering, also became an arena for women's political participation and ethical action, as they organized networks of care, community protection, and religious leadership central to communal survival.

Education likewise played a critical role in preserving Karen identity and fostering resilience across generations. Supported by missionary organizations and international NGOs, the *Karen National Union* (KNU) and its allied bodies—including the KWO and the *Karen Education Department* (KED)—expanded humanitarian and educational initiatives to reach displaced and internally displaced populations. These programs provided schooling materials, vocational training, and health resources, ensuring both survival and the continuity of learning in exile (Chung-chi 205). As Chung-chi argues, the KNU and its affiliates strategically used education as a non-military form of resistance—cultivating literacy, religious instruction, and political awareness as part of a "soft struggle" for national endurance (204–206). In this sense, education became a vehicle for cultural reproduction and political socialization, transforming refugee camps into moral and symbolic spaces of belonging.

Collectively, the transformations in gendered labour, family roles, and educational practices demonstrate that Karen refugee camps were not merely sites of containment but arenas of social reconstruction. Within these spaces, women's leadership, pedagogical work, and communal resilience sustained the Karen nation in exile—redefining displacement as an ongoing process of cultural and political renewal.

2.8 Regional Resettlement

In 2005, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Thailand agreed that the 140,000 Karen refugees who had been living along the Thai border for more than two decades should be resettled to other countries, as their situation was no longer considered temporary. This decision initiated the UNHCR's Third Country Resettlement Programme, which marked a significant turning point in the Karen refugee trajectory. Between 2005 and 2007, approximately 50,000 Karen refugees were resettled in the United States, Canada, and Australia (Mantel 103). Canada's group resettlement of Karen refugees was part of this plan and became one of the largest coordinated group resettlements in the country's history. Canada accepted an initial 810 Karen refugees in 2005 and announced in 2007 its commitment to welcome

an additional 2,000 (Government of Canada). Burrows, who oversaw the Canadian refugee movement from the Singapore embassy, recounts how 2,600 Karen refugees were processed from the Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps despite logistical barriers and security risks (2–3). Of these, 208 were resettled in London, Ontario, while others were placed in Vancouver, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton (Erdogan 17). In 2006, Canada further committed to resettling over 3,900 Karen refugees from Thai camps, beginning with 810 arrivals and selecting an additional 1,300 persons in 2008 to depart in 2009 (https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2008/06/canada-welcome-1-300-more-karen-refugees.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com). Although resettlement offered safety and new opportunities, it also introduced challenges of cultural adjustment, linguistic isolation, and shifting family dynamics.

2.9 Resettlement, Resilience, and Belonging

Upon arrival, Karen refugees encountered multiple challenges shaped by the long-term effects of displacement and dependency developed during years in refugee camps. In Thailand, their daily survival had relied on external assistance: the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) provided food, the UNHCR ensured safety and education, and NGOs offered healthcare and occasional employment (MacLaren et al. 75). As Johnson et al. (2012) note, many Karen refugees continued to depend on social welfare supports post-resettlement, given their limited financial capital and restricted access to credit (qtd. in MacLaren et al. 69). Mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression were common outcomes of prolonged exposure to violence and insecurity, affecting resettlement experiences in Australia (Schweitzer et al., 2011, qtd. in MacLaren et al. 70), Canada (Ewen 71; Clark 260), and the United States (Gilhooly and Lynn 805).

Studies of Karen refugees' settlement experiences across the Greater Vancouver Area, Saskatoon, Toronto, and London (Ontario) reveal seven interrelated barriers that shape their adaptation and well-being: persistent linguistic and literacy difficulties, limited employment opportunities, inadequate and unaffordable housing, restricted access to healthcare, ongoing negotiations of disrupted and emerging identities, settlement programs ill-equipped to address linguistic and cultural specificities, and enduring psychological distress linked to trauma and identity conflict (Marchbank et al.; Ewen; Smith; Clark; Erdoğan).

The protracted displacement of the Karen profoundly influenced their resettlement trajectories. Years of instability and limited schooling in refugee camps resulted in low literacy rates among both adults and children (Marchbank 7). English language acquisition posed a particular challenge, especially for older refugees who found ESL programs ineffective or demotivating. Older adults—especially those over fifty—often expressed frustration when placed in mixed-age classes where younger learners progressed more rapidly. Language barriers also restricted access to healthcare, where interpretation was essential to facilitate communication with medical professionals (MacLaren et al., Marchbank et al., Ewen). While some Karen refugees deprioritized language learning to focus on immediate economic stability, others sought employment to achieve self-reliance and provide for their families (Ewen 62).

However, limited formal education and work experience—most having engaged in subsistence farming prior to displacement—confined them to precarious forms of labour such as warehouse, greenhouse, cleaning, kitchen, and construction work (Marchbank et al. 22–23). Workplace discrimination and racial stereotyping compounded these challenges: Karen employees were sometimes assigned physically demanding tasks, subjected to verbal abuse, or mocked for their limited English proficiency (Marchbank et al. 40; Ewen 68). These experiences reinforced their marginal positioning within Canada's labour market and underscored the intersection of race, class, and language in shaping integration outcomes.

Housing insecurity emerged as another critical challenge. Although Canadian resettlement freed Karen refugees from the structural instability of camps, they faced new hardships in locating affordable, adequate housing. Studies document difficulties with unresponsive landlords, substandard living conditions, vermin infestations, and chronic overcrowding due to limited income (Ewen 66; Smith 6; Marchbank et al. 7). Perceptions of safety also varied by age and gender: while older adults valued neighbourhoods with other Karen families and felt relatively secure, younger refugees reported experiences of bullying, harassment, and fear of crime or gang activity (Marchbank et al. 21–22).

Resettlement also reconfigured gender roles and family structures, revealing generational and gendered dynamics of adaptation. Middle-aged and elderly men—historically breadwinners—struggled with unemployment and limited English proficiency, leading to diminished social identities. In contrast, many women maintained traditional caregiving roles while assuming new forms of leadership within churches and community networks (Gilhooly and Lynn 807). Young

adults, especially those in Vancouver, achieved higher employment rates but often worked multiple low-wage jobs to manage government transportation loans and high living costs (Marchbank et al. 24–25). Weaving, as Mantei's interviews in Saskatchewan illustrate, continued to serve as a symbolic and meaningful activity among women excluded from the formal labour market, offering both cultural continuity and a sense of agency (118).

Clark's (2015) feminist ethnographic study of Karen refugee women resettled in the Greater Vancouver Area, British Columbia, illustrates how resettlement intersected with gender, language, and trauma to produce enduring contexts of dependency and resilience. Many Karen women, who had endured long years of camp displacement and educational interruption, found that settlement programs failed to accommodate their linguistic and cultural needs, leaving them "worried and lost" as they navigated childrearing, healthcare, and bureaucratic systems in an unfamiliar environment (Clark 231–233). The lack of culturally safe interpreter services and limited literacy resources reinforced women's reliance on settlement workers and family members, often compromising confidentiality and autonomy (Clark 240–241, 256–259). Nevertheless, within these constraints, Karen women articulated agency by developing informal networks of care and support and by seeking education for themselves and their children as a pathway to empowerment (Clark 266–268). Clark's participants emphasized that meaningful resettlement requires culturally responsive, gender-sensitive supports that recognize refugee women not merely as dependent subjects but as knowledge holders navigating multiple systems of marginalization (Clark 230–270).

Erdoğan's analysis of identity reconstruction, acculturation, and mental health among Karen refugees in London, Ontario, similarly demonstrates that resettlement disrupted refugees' sense of temporal and spatial continuity, producing sustained identity distress as individuals struggled to integrate pre-migration identities with new cultural realities. Despite achieving relative safety and material stability, many participants continued to experience displacement and loss of social status, particularly in relation to employment, education, and community belonging. Erdoğan identifies three dominant acculturation strategies—integration, assimilation, and segregation—with most Karen refugees striving toward integration, balancing the preservation of cultural values with participation in Canadian society. However, those experiencing unresolved trauma and psychological distress were more likely to adopt segregationist approaches, limiting engagement with the broader community. Erdoğan concludes that identity resolution and

psychological well-being are central predictors of successful acculturation, and that structural factors—such as education, language access, and culturally responsive settlement services—play critical roles in facilitating adaptation. Ultimately, Erdoğan argues that refugee resettlement is not merely a logistical or economic transition, but an ongoing process of identity negotiation shaped by trauma, belonging, and the quest for recognition within the host society (Erdoğan 238–243).

Education became central to the reconstruction of identity and aspiration among Karen youth. Parents viewed schooling as the key pathway to upward mobility and invested heavily in their children's education despite systemic barriers (Shakya et al. 68–70; Marchbank et al. 41–42). These findings suggest that youth often assumed additional roles as interpreters, caretakers, and financial contributors for their families—responsibilities that intensified intergenerational tensions but also fostered resilience and maturity. These dynamics reflect how education, work, and family relations intertwine in the intergenerational negotiation of settlement and identity formation. Collectively, Karen refugees responded to resettlement challenges through community-based, rather than individualistic, strategies. They drew on survival skills from camp life—such as communal labour and informal economic practices—to mitigate underemployment and social isolation (Gilhooly and Lynn 806). Employment networks frequently spread through word of mouth, facilitating access to jobs in familiar sectors such as meat processing, construction, and agriculture (Marchbank et al. 22–23; Ewen 69–70). Although most Karen refugees remained in low-wage positions, they demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong work ethic. Employers and settlement agencies often perceived them as "good workers" and "good refugees"—hardworking, appreciative, and compliant (Ewen 58, 70; MacLaren et al. 77).

Churches and faith-based organizations played a pivotal role in the resettlement process, providing not only spiritual grounding but also practical support. They facilitated employment connections, housing referrals, access to social services, and heritage language instruction (Gilhooly and Lynn 809; Ewen 84; Marchbank et al. 29). Karen youth groups organized sports and cultural activities, strengthening intergenerational cohesion and ethnic pride. Marchbank et al. report that 72 percent of participants in Vancouver described their resettlement as "successful," attributing this to safety, freedom, employment opportunities, and prospects for their children (45–46). Similarly, Ewen's interviews with refugees in Saskatoon revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions of resettlement—described by participants in their own words as "much better," "really good," and "perfect"—in comparison to life in camps (48). Refugees expressed gratitude

for access to necessities and viewed Canada as a space of dignity and opportunity rather than charity (Ewen 48, 59, 89).

Both Clark (2015) and Erdoğan (2012) reveal that Karen refugees in Canada confronted systemic resettlement challenges through collective and community-based strategies emphasizing mutual care, trust, and interdependence rather than individual adjustment. In Clark's ethnographic study, Karen women built informal support networks that compensated for linguistic and institutional barriers—sharing information about healthcare, childcare, and employment, and using group discussions to cope with discrimination and isolation. These networks provided culturally safe spaces for emotional healing and empowerment, especially when formal services lacked gender and cultural sensitivity (Clark 256–263). Similarly, Erdoğan's findings from London, Ontario, show that collective belonging and social cohesion played a critical role in moderating the effects of identity distress and acculturation stress. Karen refugees who maintained close ties within their ethnic community and participated in shared cultural or religious activities demonstrated stronger integration-oriented acculturation strategies and healthier identity reconstruction, balancing cultural preservation with engagement in Canadian society (Erdoğan 105–108). Together, these studies underscore that collective resilience, grounded in kinship and cultural interdependence, functioned as a vital coping mechanism enabling Karen refugees to navigate structural marginalization and rebuild a sense of agency in resettlement.

Smith et al. (2021) examine the group resettlement of Karen refugees in Canada and reveal how collective adaptation unfolded amid structural shortcomings in national integration policy. Although Canada's resettlement program sought rapid adjustment, standardized pre-arrival orientations and settlement services often failed to accommodate the linguistic, cultural, and trauma-related complexities of the Karen population, many of whom arrived with limited literacy and English proficiency (102–104). In the face of inadequate institutional responsiveness, Karen refugees relied on communal resilience grounded in kinship, church networks, and grassroots leadership. Community leaders—frequently former refugees—acted as interpreters, mediators, and advocates, securing access to housing, education, and healthcare for newly arrived families (106–107). Resettlement also reshaped gender and family dynamics: while traditional domestic roles persisted, women increasingly assumed economic and leadership responsibilities within churches and community associations, illustrating adaptive transformations of gendered agency (106–107). Smith et al. further identify community self-organization as a defining feature of

successful integration. Local Karen groups established innovative, cooperative systems that mitigated service gaps, expanded employment opportunities, and strengthened social cohesion. These collective practices, the authors argue, exemplify refugee communities' capacity to generate bottom-up integration models that complement formal state structures, transforming resettlement from a process of dependency into one of participatory belonging (108–109).

In summary, the literature on Karen refugees' resettlement in Canada demonstrates how the legacies of protracted displacement continue to shape integration trajectories through structural, linguistic, and cultural challenges, while also revealing the power of collective resilience. Despite persistent hardships—such as housing precarity, limited employment mobility, and systemic service gaps—Karen refugees have drawn on communal survival mechanisms cultivated in refugee camps to rebuild lives in urban Canadian contexts. Studies highlight that Karen communities respond to institutional shortcomings through collective strategies of mutual aid, advocacy, and grassroots organization (Smith et al. 108–109). Community leaders and faith-based networks have played pivotal roles in mediating access to housing, healthcare, and education, transforming resettlement from a top-down administrative process into a community-driven model of belonging (Smith et al. 106–107). One in five Karen households in Vancouver reportedly spends over 70 percent of its income on rent yet consistently makes payments, reflecting disciplined collective management and mutual support (Marchbank et al. 20). These practices underscore that resettlement is not merely an individual adjustment to host society but an ongoing process of collective emplacement, where social cohesion, cultural reproduction, and adaptive solidarity coexist with structural marginalization.

These findings also reaffirm Hua's (195) critique of essentialist diaspora narratives, which romanticize the homeland as "authentic" and the host nation as "inauthentic." For most Karen refugees, belonging is no longer imagined as a return to Burma but as a process of homemaking in Canada, rooted in security, family, and freedom. As Marchbank (43), Smith (6), and Smith et al. (109) note, homeownership, education, and employment now serve as markers of belonging and stability—conditions unattainable in Burma or Thailand. Karen refugees thus redefine diaspora not as nostalgic displacement but as active emplacement, constructing Canada as their authentic homeland where safety, community, and self-determination converge.

2.10 Conclusion: Addressing Gaps in Karen Refugee Studies in Canada

The existing scholarship on Karen refugees in Canada provides valuable insights into the historical displacement, protracted camp life, and early resettlement experiences of Karen communities (Marchbank et al.; Ewen; Smith et al.; Clark; Erdoğan). However, several critical gaps persist. First, much of the existing research focuses on *collective adaptation and community-based resilience*, often analyzing Karen refugees as a homogenous group. This approach overlooks the gendered and intergenerational differences that shape how women, men, and youth experience settlement, belonging, and identity transformation. While scholars such as Clark (2015) and Erdoğan (2012) have explored trauma, language, and identity reconstruction, few studies have examined how gender, age, and family roles intersect to produce distinct settlement experiences among Karen refugee women in different life stages.

Second, previous research has concentrated mainly on urban resettlement contexts in Western Canada—particularly in Vancouver, Saskatoon, and Toronto—while smaller cities such as London, Ontario, remain understudied, particularly on women and girl refugees despite their growing Southeast Asian refugee populations. This geographic gap limits our understanding of how local settlement infrastructures, labour markets, and community networks shape refugee women's everyday negotiations of care, identity, and belonging across generations in mid-sized urban settings. Third, the literature rarely integrates an intersectional feminist analysis that foregrounds women's agency within the intersecting structures of displacement, patriarchy, religion, race, and class. Most existing accounts treat gender as a secondary variable rather than a constitutive framework of analysis. Consequently, the lived experiences of Karen refugee women—especially across generations—remain under-theorized within broader feminist and migration studies.

My dissertation, *Gendered and Intersectional Impacts of Displacement: Settlement Experiences of Intergenerational Karen Refugee Women in London, Ontario*, directly addresses these limitations by offering an empirically grounded and theoretically robust examination of how displacement, gender, and generation interact to shape settlement outcomes. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with both older and younger Karen refugee women, this study illuminates the continuities between camp-based survival strategies and post-migration adaptation, revealing how women transform domestic labour, caregiving, and community work into practices of agency and resilience. By situating these experiences within an intersectional and feminist theoretical

framework informed by Crenshaw (1989), Collins (2000), and Hynie (2018), this research reframes Karen women not as passive recipients of aid but as active agents of cultural reproduction, care, and leadership within their transnational community. Ultimately, my dissertation fills a critical scholarly gap by producing one of the first intersectional, gender-focused, and intergenerational analyses of Karen refugee resettlement in Ontario. It contributes new theoretical and empirical insights to feminist migration studies while also informing policy and community practice on inclusive, gender-responsive refugee integration in Canada.

CHAPTER THREE
Literature Review:
Refugee Integration, Gender Experiences and Intergenerational Agencies

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter provides a critical review of contemporary scholarship on refugee integration, with a particular focus on the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dynamics that shape the experiences of refugee women and girls from protracted conflict settings. The chapter is structured into five major sections, each addressing a distinct yet interrelated dimension of integration theory and practice relevant to the lives of Karen refugee mothers and daughters in Canada.

Section 3.2 introduces the landscape of refugee resettlement in Canada, examining national and provincial policy frameworks, settlement programs, and service infrastructures. It highlights both the strengths of Canada's model and its persistent structural inequities, including inconsistent regional service provision, unstable funding cycles, gaps in gender-responsive supports, and barriers related to employment, housing, language acquisition, and health access.

Section 3.3 turns to theoretical models of integration. While Ager and Strang's ten-domain framework provides a foundational lens, this section draws on Michaela Hynie and other scholars to critique dominant approaches that privilege structural and economic indicators. It argues for understanding integration as a relational, context-driven process shaped by institutional responsiveness, social inclusion, and the affective dimensions of belonging.

Section 3.4 deepens this critique by examining the gendered and intersectional dimensions of integration across the pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases. Drawing on feminist and intersectionality scholarship, it documents how gender-based violence, displacement trauma, cultural norms, caregiving responsibilities, health vulnerabilities, and institutional exclusions intersect to shape refugee women's resettlement trajectories. This section also reviews research on health and well-being, emphasizing the social determinants and systemic barriers that disproportionately affect refugee women.

Section 3.5 explores coping, agency, and intergenerational responsibilities. It is organized into three subsections:

- 3.5.1 Cultural Legacy and Gendered Coping, which examines how intangible cultural heritage, caregiving norms, and intergenerational expectations shape women's coping strategies and enable both continuity and adaptation in resettlement.
- 3.5.2 Contextual and Relational Dimensions of Women's Agency, which draws on feminist, postcolonial, and psychological debates to illuminate the culturally embedded, relational, and survival-oriented practices through which refugee women enact agency; and
- 3.5.3 Youth Agency and Gendered Resilience, which analyzes how refugee daughters act as cultural brokers, translators, caregivers, and "resettlement champions," contributing significantly—but often invisibly—to family integration while negotiating gendered expectations and identity formation.

Across these sections, the concluding section identifies three core gaps in existing scholarship. First, limited research explores the gendered and intersectional impacts of displacement on Karen refugee women and girls, particularly how they interpret and negotiate gender roles in resettlement. Second, little is known about how Karen women across generations differently experience, interpret, and shape integration processes in Canada. Third, the literature rarely examines the critical yet underrecognized contributions of young female refugees to family and community integration, despite their central role in navigating institutional systems and supporting intergenerational resilience.

By outlining these conceptual and empirical gaps, the chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for the dissertation's research questions and sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows. It argues that integration must be understood not merely as individual adaptation but as a relational, culturally grounded, and gendered process continually shaped through the everyday practices of intergenerational (older and younger refugee women) in Canada.

3.2 Refugee policies and settlement programs: Opportunities & Structural Barriers

Canada has developed one of the most structured and internationally recognized approaches to refugee resettlement, combining government-led programs with strong community participation. While these programs provide a foundation for refugee settlement, outcomes remain uneven, and significant structural barriers persist. To fully understand the Canadian model, it is necessary to examine not only the policies and programs that guide resettlement but also the roles of community-based organizations and the systemic challenges that shape integration trajectories.

This section reviews Canada's sponsorship and settlement frameworks, highlights the complementary contributions of non-profit organizations, and critically analyzes settlement outcomes across housing, employment, education, language training, and healthcare. In doing so, it situates Canada's resettlement system within broader debates about inclusion, exclusion, and equity in integration.

3.2.1 Government Programs and Settlement Frameworks

Central to Canada's resettlement model is the twin-track sponsorship system introduced in 1979, which established both Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) and Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) as key categories for entry. GARs receive initial support through the federally funded Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), which provides temporary income support, orientation, and help in accessing housing, healthcare, and other essential services during the first year of arrival (Government of Canada, *Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) Service Provider Handbook*). PSRs, in contrast, are supported by private groups—often faith-based or community organizations—who assume financial and settlement responsibilities for the same period. Together with more recent programs such as the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) initiative, this sponsorship framework reflects a distinctive Canadian approach that combines state support with strong civil society involvement (Hyndman, Payne, and Jimenez 56–57).

Beyond sponsorship, settlement services are primarily delivered through federally funded but locally administered programs. The Settlement Program provides services such as language training (e.g., LINC), employment counselling, and community orientation, with service providers ranging from large urban organizations to smaller community-based agencies. Provincial governments also play a role, particularly in Quebec and Manitoba, which hold agreements with Ottawa to administer their own settlement services (Hynie, Korn, and Tao; Government of Canada, Canada–Quebec Accord).

While Canada offers a wide range of resettlement and settlement supports, significant structural challenges continue to affect the consistency and quality of service delivery. Testimony presented to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration highlights how unstable and unpredictable funding cycles make it difficult for service providers to sustain programming and retain qualified staff; as the Committee notes, "without stable and predictable funding, it is not possible for settlement services providers to fully develop

programming and retain staff" (House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration 2). The report also documents uneven regional access to services, with organizations emphasizing that variations in provincial and local resource levels result in "uneven access to services based on province of residence" (40). These findings demonstrate that, despite a comprehensive settlement infrastructure, Canada's system remains shaped by funding instability and regional disparities that undermine equitable support for newcomers. These issues underscore the need to look beyond formal policy frameworks and examine the broader ecosystem of organizations that collectively support refugee settlement.

3.2.2 The Role of Non-Profit and Community-Based Organizations

Community-based and non-profit organizations play a pivotal role in supporting newcomers' access to healthcare by addressing gaps that formal health systems do not fully meet. Ratnayake et al. show that these organizations enhance access through a wide range of functions, including collaborating with health-sector partners, connecting clients to service providers, advocating for immigrant health, providing educational programming, and mobilizing community-level advocacy initiatives (Ratnayake et al. 2). Their analysis further emphasizes that these organizations are "uniquely positioned on the ground' to recognize emerging needs, work closely with clients, support healthcare navigation, offer referrals, and partner with health institutions to deliver responsive programs (Ratnayake et al. 12). Case studies reviewed in the article illustrate how organizations act as brokers by accompanying clients to medical appointments, providing interpretation and communication support, and delivering specialized interventions such as perinatal health programs and mental health crisis support for high-needs immigrant and refugee populations (Ratnayake et al. 9–11). Together, these examples demonstrate how community organizations provide relational, practical, and advocacy-based support that significantly improves newcomers' ability to access and engage with healthcare services.

3.2.3 Settlement Outcomes and Structural Barriers

Despite this complex web of support, refugee outcomes remain uneven. The Settlement Outcomes Highlights Report (IRCC 2021) underscores that newcomers do not begin from the same position: GARs and PSRs often arrive with fewer assets and greater vulnerabilities than economic-class migrants, placing them at a structural disadvantage (4). GARs also have the highest rates of

support-service use—including translation, interpretation, childcare, and transportation—reflecting greater needs in the early stages of resettlement (5). Service-use patterns further show that resettled refugees continue to rely on services longer than other groups, with long-term usage "largely concentrated" among GARs (6). Gender compounds these inequalities, as shortages in childcare create significant barriers for newcomer women attempting to pursue training or employment (5). Although Canada's model is often celebrated, IRCC's own data reveal that refugee earnings remain the lowest among immigrant categories, with GARs disproportionately concentrated in precarious work due to interrupted education and limited recognition of foreign credentials (7).

Qualitative studies further document systemic barriers that limit refugees' access to adequate care. Providers consistently identify language limitations, the shortage of professional interpretation, and cultural mismatches during clinical encounters as central obstacles that prevent refugees from understanding diagnoses, navigating follow-up care, or building trust with practitioners (McKeary and Newbold 7–11). These barriers are intensified by poverty, as the cost of transportation, childcare, and time away from work restricts access even when services are technically available (16). McKeary and Newbold also highlight the lack of coordination between federal and provincial governments in funding interpretation services, leaving community agencies to subsidize translation despite already limited budgets (8–9). Given these intersecting factors, health access cannot be separated from the broader social and economic structures that systematically produce vulnerability and exclusion for refugee populations.

The work of Hynie, Korn, and Tao (2016) and subsequent scholarship by Hynie reinforces this structural analysis by demonstrating that integration is not reducible to individual motivation or effort but depends fundamentally on the social and institutional environments in which refugees resettle. In "Refugee Integration: Research and Policy," Hynie emphasizes that refugees typically arrive with fewer economic resources, more limited social networks, lower language proficiency, and a higher likelihood of trauma exposure than other migrants—conditions that shape long-term settlement trajectories (265). She further argues that integration is strongly determined by policies that structure access to employment, housing, healthcare, and education, with these domains reinforcing one another: limited language skills impede employment; inadequate housing undermines health; and low income restricts access to educational opportunities (266). Hynie's analysis shows how policy environments and institutional responses shape the very conditions that

appear in outcome data, revealing why refugees continue to face barriers even after years in Canada (267).

Taken together, these studies reveal a paradox. Canada's settlement model is often portrayed as inclusive and comprehensive, yet persistent inequities in housing, employment, education, language, and healthcare undermine the promise of successful integration. Gendered constraints, service fragmentation, and uneven regional resources exacerbate these challenges. Recognizing settlement outcomes, therefore, requires moving beyond narrow policy metrics to situate integration within its broader structural and social contexts, where institutional supports, community networks, and policy environments interact to shape lived experiences.

3.3 Rethinking Integration: Perceptions of "Successful Integration."

The process for refugees in Canada typically unfolds in two interconnected phases: settlement (the initial stage) and integration (the longer-term process). While both are essential for a successful transition, they respond to different needs and challenges. In the settlement phase—what Holt and Laitsch describe as "acclimatization and initial adaptation" (132)—refugees concentrate on meeting immediate needs such as housing, food, and clothing, while also gaining access to essential services, including healthcare, legal assistance, social and employment supports, and language training to overcome communication barriers (Bhattacharyya et al.; Holt and Laitsch).
The long-term process of integration, by contrast, involves becoming active participants in Canadian society: achieving economic self-sufficiency, developing social connections, and pursuing educational and personal growth through federal and provincial initiatives as well as local community networks (Holt and Laitsch; Hynie, Korn, and Tao). From the perspective of Canada's settlement agencies, settlement is about providing immediate stability—ensuring that refugees have a safe environment, access to services, and the resources to begin building their lives in Canada (Government of Canada, *Settlement Program*). Integration, in turn, is framed as a pathway to long-term success, empowering refugees to contribute to Canadian society, gain economic independence, and cultivate a lasting sense of belonging.

Defining what constitutes "successful integration" remains a contested issue. While there is broad agreement that integration involves participation in the economic, social, and cultural life of the host society, measuring success is less precise. The UNHCR defines integration as "a mutual, dynamic, multifaceted, and ongoing process" between refugees, host communities, and public

institutions (*International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration* 12). This framework expects host societies to provide support and public institutions to adapt to diversity, while refugees are expected to adjust to new lifestyles without losing their cultural identity. However, this conception risks obscuring the uneven realities of resettlement, as the ability to achieve comparable social and economic outcomes varies according to refugees' age, gender, migration history, and prior experiences of displacement. For many who arrive from protracted refugee situations, Canada offers educational and employment opportunities, but outcomes are rarely equal across groups (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 326).

Hynie's earlier work further strengthens this critique. In *"Refugee Integration: Research and Policy,"* she argues that dominant definitions of "successful integration" rely too heavily on functional, outcome-driven indicators such as employment or language proficiency, even though these indicators are shaped by conditions largely beyond individual control (265). She highlights that refugees often enter Canada with fewer economic resources, smaller social networks, lower language proficiency, and greater exposure to trauma than other migrant groups—factors that profoundly influence their capacity to meet conventional benchmarks of success (265). Because these structural starting points differ, integration cannot be evaluated through uniform metrics. Hynie further explains that integration outcomes are inseparable from the policy environments that determine access to housing, healthcare, employment, and education; these institutional conditions shape refugees' opportunities more than individual motivation or effort (266). Thus, a narrow focus on labour market participation risks misrepresenting integration by overlooking the systemic constraints that structure refugees' daily lives and long-term trajectories (267).

Hynie conceptualizes integration as a process profoundly shaped by intersectional social positions and local contexts rather than as a uniform trajectory. She argues that race, gender, age, immigration status, and socioeconomic background intersect to produce unequal opportunities and barriers, with racialized or gender-diverse refugees often facing compounded forms of exclusion (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 321–22). This demonstrates that integration cannot be measured by a single outcome such as employment, but must instead be understood through the intersecting social, cultural, and structural dimensions that shape lived experiences. The local settlement environment further shapes outcomes: integration differs across urban and rural contexts and is influenced by the inclusivity of local institutions and communities (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 324). These differences reveal that integration is not a uniform trajectory, but rather varies across

individuals and groups, depending on both their social identities and the contexts in which they resettle.

Importantly, Hynie frames integration as a relational process—it depends not only on refugees' adaptive efforts but also on host societies' willingness to engage in mutual transformation (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 328). Whereas policy frameworks often slide into assimilationist expectations by focusing on refugee adaptation, Hynie emphasizes that integration is a two-way process that requires both host societies and institutions to transform alongside newcomers. Within this framework, refugees are not passive recipients but active participants who draw on cultural knowledge, social networks, and resilience to navigate and negotiate their integration ("*From the Outside In"* 330). Her analysis challenges assimilationist and one-size-fits-all approaches, calling instead for intersectional and context-sensitive understandings that reflect the diversity of refugee experiences and the relational dynamics that shape them ("*From the Outside In"* 333).

These contrasting perspectives highlight a key tension: while policy frameworks often measure "success" through narrow, outcome-driven indicators such as employment or language acquisition, refugees themselves experience integration in relational, cultural, and gendered terms. This recognition opens the way for a deeper analysis of how women negotiate integration not only as individuals but also as caregivers, cultural transmitters, and community builders—dimensions too often overlooked in conventional accounts of settlement.

3.4 Gendered and Intersectional Dimensions of Integration

Research increasingly shows that integration cannot be fully understood without attention to the gendered and intersectional structures that shape refugees' lives before, during, and after displacement. While dominant integration frameworks prioritize economic participation, language acquisition, and social engagement, these measures overlook how refugee women's trajectories are shaped by caregiving responsibilities, gendered labour expectations, and intersecting social identities. Phillimore demonstrates that refugee women frequently experience intensified social isolation—particularly single mothers who move from communal to nuclear family settings—which constrains their participation in public life and increases their caregiving burdens (585). She further notes that women's integration is affected by gender-specific experiences such as sexual violence and by the chronic lack of gender-sensitive medical and psychosocial services, leaving critical health needs unmet (586). These insights highlight that integration for women extends far

beyond paid work or language acquisition to encompass reproductive labour, emotional well-being, and equitable access to gender-responsive supports.

Intersectional analyses deepen this perspective by illustrating how race, class, migration history, religion, legal status, and age intersect with gender to produce unequal resettlement outcomes. Phillimore argues that integration cannot be a one-directional process of refugee adaptation; instead, institutions must also adapt to enable healthier adjustment strategies (579–80). In the absence of such reciprocity, women often experience "acculturative stress" (579), intensified by racism, harassment, service gaps, and structurally embedded exclusions that restrict belonging (587–88). Feminist migration scholarship similarly critiques assimilationist assumptions and calls for more context-sensitive understandings of integration that recognize the relational and embodied realities of refugee women's lives.

For instance, comparative research further reveals pronounced gender differences in resettlement trajectories. Mantel observes that some refugee women are unable to pursue employment because of serious health conditions rooted in inadequate healthcare and traditional gendered responsibilities (122). Shields and Lujan find that immigrant families and youth frequently experience economic insecurity, barriers in the school system, limited access to culturally appropriate healthcare, precarious housing, and discrimination in the labour market—conditions that contribute to underemployment, poorer mental health, and weakened belonging (viii). Despite the availability of numerous integration programs, many do not adequately address the needs of resettled refugees from protracted situations. Presse and Thomson therefore argue that integration measures must incorporate both subjective and objective dimensions and reflect the distinct needs of women, men, youth, children, and elders, who encounter different structural conditions (97).

3.4.1 Migration from War Zones: Gendered Stressors Across the Displacement Journey

An expanding body of literature demonstrates that refugee women's integration trajectories are profoundly shaped by gendered stressors that accumulate across pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases. Pre-migration stressors such as armed conflict, persecution, displacement, material deprivation, and gender-based violence create layered vulnerabilities that affect women's physical and emotional well-being in advance of resettlement (Kaplan; Raphael et al.; United Nations Secretary-General 2016). These conditions expose women to prolonged trauma, restricted

mobility, and the loss of family and community supports, with lasting consequences for their resettlement experiences. Scholars further emphasize that refugee women's experiences are not simply additive but are structurally patterned by gender. Olivius (2019), Buscher (2019), and Martin (2019) show that gender-based violence, economic marginalization, sexual and reproductive health risks, and the destruction of livelihoods interact with conflict-related trauma in ways that produce distinct forms of precarity. These challenges are not incidental; they reflect the gendered political economies of war, flight, and humanitarian response, in which women frequently bear disproportionate caregiving burdens while lacking access to protection, documentation, or resources.

Critically, these vulnerabilities do not disappear upon arrival in host countries. Instead, they intersect with structural conditions in receiving societies, shaping integration outcomes and access to services. An intersectional lens is therefore essential: gender interacts with culture, class, religion, age, and immigration status to influence women's coping strategies, their ability to navigate institutions, and the forms of support they can access across the migration journey. Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1991), highlights how these social positions are not discrete but mutually constitutive, producing unique configurations of privilege, constraint, and vulnerability. As Ashbourne et al. note, refugee families experience fluctuating authority, roles, and social status across contexts, underscoring the importance of examining how people negotiate opportunity, oppression, conflict, and change within and across migration phases (115). Prior research similarly demonstrates that refugee families confront political, social, and institutional pressures throughout both mobility and resettlement, often intensified by racism, discrimination, Islamophobia, and labour-market exclusion in receiving societies—conditions that can exacerbate trauma or re-traumatize individuals (Bahdi, 2018; Dean & Wilson, 2009; Jiwani, 2005; Leber, 2017; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018 qtd. in Ashbourne et al. 115).

Ashbourne et al.'s study of Arab families fleeing war zones illustrates how gender roles shift considerably across the pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases. Prior to political unrest, participants described gender roles as relatively stable: men were positioned as economic providers and protectors, while women's responsibilities centred on caregiving and the domestic sphere. The onset of conflict disrupted these arrangements. Men's injury, disappearance, or inability to work created circumstances in which women assumed expanded responsibilities, reshaping marital relationships and challenging normative gender hierarchies. Importantly,

participants emphasized that these shifts occurred not because their views on gender had changed, but because protecting their children became the overriding priority—highlighting how quickly gender norms can destabilize during crisis (Ashbourne et al. 119).

During the transit phase, gendered responsibilities continued to shift as families adapted to unstable and often dangerous environments. Ashbourne et al. identify protection, provision, and care as the three domains through which husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers renegotiated their roles. Some men undertook hazardous returns to their home countries in search of income, while women frequently assumed public-facing responsibilities and sole caregiving roles. These circumstances prompted participants to reassess past gendered arrangements and, for some women, to develop retrospective empathy for the burdens their spouses had borne. However, families broadly understood these changes as temporary and exceptional, shaped by immediate concerns for safety, family unity, and survival rather than a fundamental reimagining of gender relations (Ashbourne et al. 119).

In the post-migration context, participants described further shifts as they adjusted to Canadian gender norms, economic pressures, and the absence of extended family networks. Although Canada offered increased safety and opportunities, resettlement also intensified stressors. Post-migration trauma, economic precarity, role overload, and public-safety concerns generated tension within marital and parent–child relationships. Women in particular experienced profound transformations in family responsibilities, often assuming additional care work in the absence of broader kin support (Ashbourne et al.121). By contrast, Racine and Lu observe that refugee women from highly patriarchal contexts may experience Canada as offering both protection and new forms of autonomy. Nevertheless, these opportunities can coexist with elevated domestic tensions and conflict (180).

For example, Ashbourne et al.'s study reveals that post-migration of Arab families faced challenges in maintaining their cultural and religious identity and maintaining family life. They expressed concerns about the safety, well-being, and future of daughters and sons, as well as the impact of increased freedom on family life. Some participants appreciated aspects of their post-migration family life, such as safety, access to education, and the freedom to practice religion. However, they also expressed fears about their children's adaptation to Western culture, loss of cultural traditions, and moving out of the family home. Structural barriers impacted their personal, marital, and parental well-being, with many experiencing unemployment or underemployment.

The study highlights the clash between Arab and Canadian mainstream cultural values regarding gender roles and family relations. The participants' fears about change and trauma-related stressors may have amplified the psychological need for support, and the lack of broader family support may have led to emotional, time, and financial strain. As participants envisioned the future, they held strong values for their children, ensuring that their children would maintain their cultural and religious traditions (Ashbourne et al. 122-123).

Post-migration stressors intensify as refugee women navigate unfamiliar institutional, cultural, and social environments. Kanal and Rottmann's semi-structured interviews with Syrian refugee women in Turkey demonstrate how gendered experiences of displacement continue to shape everyday well-being through three interrelated categories of stressors: *family-related, role-related, and place-related*. Family-related stressors refer to threats to the well-being of significant others and emerged as the most salient dimension of distress in women's narratives. Participants consistently defined their well-being through their children's and relatives' experiences, describing how bullying, discrimination, or economic hardship affecting family members directly undermined their sense of maternal competence and self-worth. These women also recounted the emotional costs of migration—such as leaving elderly parents behind or coping with children's labor exploitation—which further strained their ability to enact culturally valued forms of care. Such accounts highlight an interdependent sense of self, in which agency, gender norms, and parental identity are tightly linked (Kanal and Rottmann 7).

Role-related stressors arise when women are prevented from fulfilling culturally meaningful family or social roles. Many participants described profound distress stemming from their inability to perform expected maternal duties while working outside the home in physically demanding jobs. This shift from home-based caregiving to wage labor disrupted gendered identities and generated feelings of guilt, loss, and inadequacy. Women who did not engage in paid work often sought to reinforce their maternal roles through intensive child-rearing practices—such as teaching Arabic or supporting Qur'anic education—but still reported strain related to their inability to meet other gendered obligations, including assisting sisters or daughters during pregnancy and childbirth (Kanal and Rottmann 7).

Finally, *place-related stressors* highlight the significance of disrupted social environments for women who spend most of their time at home and in their neighbourhoods. Kanal and Rottmann document how the loss of supportive neighbor relations and the experience of

discrimination in Turkey eroded women's sense of safety, belonging, and emotional stability. Participants contrasted their former communities—characterized by reciprocity and mutual care—with current experiences of rejection, gossip, and social exclusion. These deteriorated neighborhood relations constrained their children's freedom, undermined parenting, and contributed to a pervasive sense of displacement (Kanal and Rottmann 8). Together, these stressors reveal how post-migration environments reproduce gendered vulnerabilities, complicating refugee women's efforts to reconstruct stability and agency after conflict-induced disruption.

Many refugee women enter resettlement with socialization in cultural contexts that assign women primary responsibility for domestic labour, caregiving, and maintaining family cohesion. These normative expectations often become strained during resettlement, where the demands of economic survival, unfamiliar institutional environments, and shifting family needs require women to assume roles that diverge from those prescribed in their countries of origin. In some contexts, women are expected to remain in the home and prioritize caregiving, while host-country integration frameworks simultaneously encourage or necessitate their participation in paid employment. Such competing expectations position gender and family roles as central determinants of women's post-migration experiences. As Curry Rodriguez notes, the intensified pressures of navigating both public and private responsibilities—often within constrained living environments—can generate profound challenges for women, regardless of their refugee status, as they attempt to fulfill culturally expected maternal roles (211).

These tensions are further exacerbated when women's participation in paid labour, access to social support, or engagement with public institutions shifts intra-household power dynamics. Resettlement may create new possibilities for financial autonomy and social participation, enabling women to renegotiate traditional hierarchies. However, these shifts may also provoke familial conflict as established gender norms are destabilized. Srabani Maitra's study of South Asian immigrant mothers in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area illustrates how women simultaneously challenge and struggle against the intersecting effects of racialized labour-market exclusion and patriarchal control, revealing how structural inequities shape the everyday negotiations of gendered roles and responsibilities.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, limited attention has been paid to how gender-role negotiations unfold specifically across the forced migration trajectory—from pre-migration to transit to post-migration—and how refugee women actively develop strategies to navigate,

resist, or reconfigure gendered expectations in resettlement (Magan 2019; Nelson et al. 2016; qtd. in Ashbourne et al. 115). Addressing this gap requires analytical frameworks that recognize gendered role negotiation not as a static outcome but as a dynamic, culturally situated, and intersectionally shaped process through which refugee women remake family life, sustain care, and mitigate gendered stressors under shifting social, economic, and political conditions.

3.4.2 Health, Well-Being, and Access to Service in Resettlement

Health and well-being remain central socio-environmental stressors that shape refugee women's integration trajectories. The cumulative effects of war, persecution, displacement, and loss place refugee women at heightened risk of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These pre-migration and transit-related harms are often intensified upon resettlement, where women must negotiate unfamiliar institutional landscapes, financial insecurity, and social isolation. Language barriers, low health literacy, limited knowledge of available services, and cultural mismatches with Western biomedical systems further constrain access to appropriate care. Reproductive and mental health needs—often neglected or misunderstood within both refugee camps and host-country systems—require targeted attention. Research on multiple forced migrations demonstrates a clear relationship between settlement experiences and health outcomes; family separation, cultural conflict, communication barriers, and limited social support consistently contribute to poorer health and hinder successful resettlement (Sidiqi 2012; Racine and Lu 2015; Clark 2018).

Studies conducted in metropolitan contexts further illustrate how structural inequalities shape health trajectories. Beiser and Hou's research with Southeast Asian refugees (Chinese, Vietnamese, and Laotian) in Vancouver shows that ethnic networks and community support are crucial social assets during resettlement. Yet, strong ethnic identification may also heighten exposure to discrimination and labour-market exclusion. Other scholars similarly demonstrate that race, gender, and class powerfully influence how non-Western migrants perceive illness, seek care, and navigate urban health systems (Bierman et al. 2009; Hankivsky and Christoffersen 2008; Racine 2003; Thurston and Vissandjée 2005; Vissandjée et al. 2007, qtd. in Racine and Lu 174). However, Racine and Lu caution that findings from large urban centres do not necessarily reflect the experiences of refugees resettled in smaller Canadian cities, whose needs often differ significantly (174).

Clark's work with Karen refugee women in Western Canada illustrates how these broader patterns manifest in smaller suburban contexts, where language barriers and low health literacy shape everyday interactions with health and social services. Limited funding for outreach, shortages of culturally competent practitioners, and gendered caregiving responsibilities disproportionately burden women, who must navigate unfamiliar systems while supporting children and elders (249–250). Participants in Clark's study described mental health as "stress and worry," linking psychological distress to structural barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and social support. Long-term displacement in refugee camps—where formal education is sparse—produces additional vulnerabilities in resettlement, particularly for women with low literacy. These barriers are compounded by neoliberal immigration policies that reproduce systemic violence and inequities (Galtung 1969; Farmer et al. 2006, qtd. in Clark 249). Although Karen-speaking settlement workers provided language interpretation, they were unable to conduct outreach due to resource shortages. Women with limited literacy thus relied heavily on more educated community members, sometimes experiencing shame or stigma as a result. At the same time, gender norms placed primary responsibility for children's health and schooling on mothers, exacerbating stress and narrowing opportunities for autonomy. Clark's findings show that Karen women engage in gendered forms of learning—such as navigating health services and participating in the Early Years Refugee Project (EYRPs)—to support their families' adaptation, while intergenerational caregiving structures continue to shape daily responsibilities (Clark 249–250).

In essence, this literature underscores that refugee women's health and well-being are inseparable from the structural, cultural, and gendered contexts of resettlement. Addressing these challenges requires interventions that provide sustained language support, culturally competent and gender-responsive healthcare, mental health resources, and legal and social assistance. These conditions are not merely background factors: they shape how women cope, exercise agency, and assume intergenerational responsibilities—dynamics explored in the following section.

3.5 Coping, Agency, and Intergenerational Responsibilities

This section examines how refugee women exercise agency and draw on culturally grounded coping strategies to navigate the challenges of displacement, health, and well-being, as well as access to services. Despite significant structural and socio-environmental stressors, the literature shows that refugee women mobilize relational, cultural, and faith-based resources to create

stability, restore meaning, and sustain family life throughout resettlement. The following subsections illustrate forms of agency that are often overlooked in integration frameworks yet remain central to the lived experiences of refugee women, particularly those who have endured forced migration from war zones. These dynamics lay the foundation for understanding coping not merely as a psychological response but as a culturally embedded and relational process. To examine how such practices take shape, the first subsection explores the forms of cultural legacy and everyday coping through which refugee women enact agency in resettlement, thereby shaping their ability to navigate opportunities and challenges in their new environments.

3.5.1 Cultural Legacy and Gendered Coping

The legacies of cultural context profoundly shape the settlement process of refugee women in Canada. These legacies can foster continuity and resilience, yet they may also generate stress when long-standing practices conflict with the social and institutional expectations of resettlement societies. Research underscores that settlement stressors are not merely individual but also structural, arising from poverty, unstable housing, limited language proficiency, and interrupted education—all of which compound the challenges women face in adapting to new environments (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 266–67). For refugee women, cultural legacies shape both coping strategies and family roles, influencing how they respond to opportunities and constraints throughout resettlement.

The case of Karen refugee women—displaced from Myanmar to refugee camps in Thailand for decades before resettling in Canada—offers a compelling example. Scholars document the effects of war trauma, protracted encampment, and forced displacement on Karen refugees, noting high levels of psychological distress alongside enduring challenges related to housing, income insecurity, and language barriers (Clark 245–47; Marchbank et al. 12, 18, 27). Cultural and family relationships remain central to shaping both stress and resilience. Refugee families often renegotiate intergenerational responsibilities and communication gaps as they adapt to new sociocultural contexts, with both young and adult members assuming substantial roles in caregiving and economic survival (Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 278–80). For women, these responsibilities are intensified by gendered expectations: caregiving becomes both a primary source of burden and a key resource for resilience and community continuity (Clark 246–47; Marchbank et al. 27–28).

In this context, "cultural legacy" refers to the intergenerational heritage of meanings, practices, and role expectations that refugee women carry, adapt, and transmit across displacement and resettlement. UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and know-how, transmitted from generation to generation" that provide communities "a sense of identity and continuity" (UNESCO, *Intangible* 4–5). Refugee women transmit this legacy through caregiving, ritual, faith practices, and everyday family decision-making—forms of living heritage that simultaneously anchor identity and support survival.

Cultural legacy is dynamic rather than static. Arab refugee families in Canada, for example, have experienced shifts in traditional family roles, with women taking on new economic responsibilities and children acting as cultural brokers—changes that generate strain but also facilitate adaptation (Ashbourne et al. 115–19). Similarly, Syrian women in Turkey rely on caregiving, homemaking, and faith-based practices as everyday strategies of resilience, allowing them to sustain belonging and agency under restrictive conditions (Kanal and Rottmann 3–4, 7). These findings highlight how women's cultural, caregiving, and religious practices—often neglected in policy-oriented integration research—constitute essential forms of intangible heritage that shape family survival and settlement trajectories.

This relationship between cultural legacy and resilience aligns with cultural theorists' emphasis on cultural memory, defined as shared knowledge and practice that guides identity across generations through rituals, stories, and symbolic forms. As Assmann explains, cultural memory is "exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms" (110) that can be "transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another" (111). Unlike communicative memory, which circulates through everyday interactions across "three interacting generations" (the living overlap of grandparents, parents, and children), cultural memory is stabilized by institutions, rituals, and collective narratives that carry meaning across time (112–13). Arab refugee families' informal sharing of memories of war and flight represents communicative memory (Ashbourne et al. 115–18), while Syrian refugees' religious rituals and collective storytelling transform traumatic experiences into cultural memory that preserves identity and belonging (Kanal and Rottmann 2–5).

Rather than representing a fixed tradition, cultural legacy is continually re-created through migration and resettlement (UNESCO, *Conventions* 3–5). For refugee women, this dynamism is a condition of survival, as cultural change intersects with gendered roles, intergenerational

expectations, and culturally shaped patterns of help-seeking (Kirmayer et al., E960–E964). Integration research highlights that well-being is shaped not only by individual adaptation but also by social contexts—policies and institutions that either support or hinder inclusion (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 270–72). Within this landscape, cultural legacy operates as a double-edged resource: it can strengthen bonds and resilience when recognized by institutions yet become a site of stress when pathologized or unsupported, especially for women responsible for cultural transmission while navigating competing demands at work, school, and home (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 270–73; Kirmayer et al. E964–E967).

Critically, refugee women's identities are shaped by intersecting structures of gender, ethnicity, class, legal status, and histories of displacement; thus, cultural legacies must be analyzed through an intersectional lens (Crenshaw 1244–47). Intersectionality helps explain why the same cultural practice—such as daughters acting as caregivers or cultural brokers—may provide stability and meaning in some contexts but become burdensome in others when combined with racism, economic precarity, or inadequate settlement supports (Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 278–80). Cultural legacy is therefore neither a simple barrier nor an unqualified resource; it is a dynamic constellation of obligations and strategies whose impacts depend on institutional arrangements and broader power relations (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 270–73; Crenshaw 1244–49).

Collectively, these dynamics underscore that cultural legacy forms a crucial foundation for understanding refugee women's coping. Nevertheless, they also point to the need for deeper analysis of the agentic practices through which women navigate these shifting terrains—a focus developed in the following subsection.

3.5.2 Contextual and Relational Dimensions of Refugee Women's Agency

Building on the preceding discussion of cultural legacy and gendered coping, this subsection turns to feminist and postcolonial debates to examine how refugee women enact agency within and against structural constraints. The concept of agency remains contested, as scholars debate how marginalized actors navigate systems of domination. Feminist and postcolonial critiques have long challenged Western assumptions that equate agency solely with autonomy, rational choice, or resistance (Kanal and Rottmann 2). Spivak and Mahmood, for example, argue that such binaries—agent versus victim—fail to capture culturally embedded, relational, and embodied forms of agency enacted by non-Western women (qtd. in Kanal and Rottmann 2). Mahmood's ethnographic

work shows that practices such as piety and religious devotion among Egyptian Muslim women can constitute agentic action within rather than against patriarchal norms (209). This re-theorization challenges dominant frameworks that associate agency exclusively with resistance, positioning it instead as contextually situated, relational, and historically contingent.

Similarly, Judith Butler's critique of the projected vulnerability problematizes humanitarian narratives that cast refugee women as inherently powerless subjects. Butler argues that vulnerability itself can be a resource for agency when reframed as a condition for potential action rather than inherent victimhood. This perspective is particularly relevant in humanitarian and legal contexts, where refugee women are often portrayed as passive recipients of aid. Butler's insights highlight the need to decouple vulnerability from victimhood in theorizing the agency of refugee women. In contrast, psychological frameworks tend to define agency as the individual's capacity to act intentionally to achieve desired outcomes (Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance" 3–5).

Haggard and Eitam define agency as the subjective experience of initiating one's own actions, while Bandura underscores self-efficacy and perceived control as central to personal agency ("Toward a Psychology" 164–65). However, these universalist frameworks risk overlooking the structural constraints that shape people's lives—constraints that are especially pronounced for displaced populations who encounter systemic barriers that limit their capacity to exercise individual control (Wojciszke qtd. in Kanal and Rottmann 3). Bandura's later three-part model of individual, proxy, and collective agency ("Toward an Agentic Theory" 15–16) offers a more flexible lens. However, it still centers an individualized conception of action and competence that inadequately captures the relational dimensions of refugee women's lives.

Migration studies have also frequently reduced refugee women's experiences to narrow stereotypes, depicting them as passive dependents or apolitical victims. Policy and academic discourses often interpret their actions merely as reactions to cultural or patriarchal oppression, obscuring the ways women actively negotiate displacement and resettlement in complex, context-specific ways (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh; Paret and Gleeson, qtd. in Kanal and Rottmann 3). Male migrants, meanwhile, are more often cast as strategic and autonomous actors, a binary division that reproduces gendered hierarchies and reinforces narratives of female vulnerability and dependency. Recent scholarship challenges these limited conceptualizations of agency. Kanal and Rottmann argue that the everyday practices of refugee women—including caregiving, community-

building, and faith-based endurance—constitute "everyday agency." This framework critiques earlier models that equated agency exclusively with overt resistance, showing instead that agency is also enacted through relational, culturally embedded, pragmatic, and survival-oriented practices that sustain daily life (2–3). These practices are frequently misinterpreted as passivity, even though they play a central role in navigating displacement.

Forced migration itself disrupts conventional models of agency. Displacement, legal precarity, and systemic marginalization can erode refugees' sense of self-efficacy and control (Nakamura and Orth; Park qtd. in Kanal and Rottmann 3). Yet practices such as spiritual surrender or faith-based acceptance should not be read as denials of agency; instead, they reflect adaptive strategies rooted in cultural values and social frameworks (Kanal and Rottmann 3). Agency may therefore manifest in practices that prioritize endurance, relational care, and collective well-being over individual autonomy.

Understanding refugee women's agency requires attention to the cultural, religious, and gendered matrices through which their actions are shaped. As Kanal and Rottmann show, practices such as sabr (patience) and alhamdulillah (expressions of gratitude) among Syrian women constitute proactive moral frameworks that support resilience during displacement (8). These practices are not passive forms of submission but expressions of empowered moral agency. Syrian mothers transmit such values to their children, using caregiving to preserve cultural identity and foster resilience under constrained conditions (Kanal and Rottmann 8). Caregiving itself becomes a central site for enacting agency. Kanal and Rottmann describe this as "agentic caregiving," whereby mothers employ limited resources to create stability, maintain familial bonds, and safeguard cultural continuity through everyday acts such as preparing traditional meals or organizing community celebrations (8–9). These practices extend beyond reproductive labour: they are relational strategies that sustain emotional well-being and collective cohesion during displacement. Other forms of agency emerge through social rituals and relational networks; for instance, relationships with neighbours can substitute for disrupted community ties, thereby enabling women to reconstruct a sense of belonging. Even domestic labour—often dismissed or overlooked in policy and academic discourse—operates as a site of agentic negotiation, where actions such as ensuring children's cleanliness and well-being assert dignity, value, and control amid the uncertainties of forced migration (Kanal and Rottmann 10).

At the same time, structural constraints—such as language barriers, limited mobility, and the heavy demands of unpaid care work—shape women's opportunities to participate in public life. Syrian women often express ambivalence toward formal employment, balancing cultural expectations, safety concerns, and caregiving responsibilities. These negotiations complicate linear narratives of empowerment and highlight the need for culturally situated analyses of agency that attend to the lived realities of refugee women.

In sum, refugee women's agency is not confined to overt acts of resistance but is enacted continuously through intimate, relational, and context-specific practices that sustain families and communities. Recognizing these forms of everyday and collective agency is essential for dismantling reductive stereotypes and for advancing migration scholarship that centers cultural values, gendered realities, and lived strategies of survival. Importantly, these insights also open the way for examining how similar forms of relational and culturally grounded agency emerge among refugee youth—a focus developed in the following subsection.

3.5.3 Youth Agency and Gendered Resilience in Refugee Integration

Refugee integration is a multidimensional and evolving process that encompasses far more than economic participation or linguistic proficiency. Ager and Strang define integration as "the achievement and maintenance of a condition within which individuals can achieve their full potential in the society of settlement" (169). Their ten-domain framework—including employment, education, housing, social bonds, and rights—remains foundational to integration studies. However, its application has often prioritized structural and institutional indicators over refugees lived and affective experiences. Michaela Hynie critiques this tendency, arguing that integration must be understood as "inclusion and participation" within a social and policy environment that either enables or hinders belonging ("Refugee Integration" 266). She emphasizes that integration "depends not only on refugees' efforts but also on how societies respond to them" (272). This relational perspective reframes integration as a reciprocal process rather than a one-sided adaptation. Nevertheless, Canadian scholarship has been comparatively slow to apply this approach to the experiences of refugee youth—particularly young women whose agency and caregiving roles remain insufficiently recognized.

Recent Canadian studies have moved beyond assimilationist models to conceptualize integration as a process of resilience and identity negotiation. Research on refugee and immigrant youth in Montreal shows that young people often describe resilience as the capacity to engage with

a new society while remaining anchored in cultural heritage and past experiences (Gyan et al. 5). Belonging, in this view, is not only structural but relational, produced through social connections that sustain both adaptation and continuity. Such findings challenge deficit-based narratives that frame refugee and immigrant youth primarily as recipients of adjustment support or as successful subjects of assimilation rather than as active contributors to family and community integration (Shields and Lujan 9; Kalchos et al. 308). Scholars note that Canadian research has seldom examined how young refugee women manage the complex task of maintaining cultural traditions, fulfilling family obligations, and pursuing their own goals while adapting to life in a new society (Kalchos, Kassan, and Ford 309; Shields and Lujan 12; Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 26).

Earlier forced migration research tended to frame youth primarily as dependents requiring protection and adjustment support. This deficit-oriented approach emphasized vulnerability over capability, obscuring the ways youth actively mediate between home and host cultures (Shields and Lujan 9; Kalchos et al. 308). More recent scholarship repositions young refugees as active social actors whose linguistic, emotional, and cultural labour contribute significantly to family and community integration. This shift from protection to participation reflects a growing recognition of youth agency within Canadian resettlement studies. For example, Shields and Lujan observe that newcomer youth "play vital but often unacknowledged roles in assisting their parents to navigate services and settlement systems" (20). Through translation, bureaucratic mediation, and emotional support, they act as unacknowledged settlement agents whose labour sustains family adaptation within precarious settlement structures. However, service providers and policymakers rarely recognize or resource this labour, revealing a persistent institutional blind spot (Shields and Lujan 12).

Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya's qualitative study of Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese youth in Toronto provides an essential empirical foundation for understanding intergenerational integration. The authors describe young refugees—particularly Karen adolescents—as "resettlement champions" who shoulder responsibilities ranging from translation to caregiving while balancing their own education (14). These findings highlight how gender, age, and cultural expectations converge in the everyday labour of integration. Although Hynie and colleagues identify these dynamics, their study does not thoroughly examine the emotional or cultural dimensions of such work, nor does it examine how gender shapes these responsibilities. Similarly, Yohani documents how refugee children act as bridges between home and school, mediating values and expectations

between families and institutions (5). Collectively, these studies underscore that integration is a relational process, yet they do not fully consider how this relationality is gendered—a conceptual gap that my study aims to address.

Gender remains underexplored in refugee youth integration scholarship despite evidence of its profound influence. The *Immigrant Youth in Canada* report notes that immigrant and refugee youth navigate cultural expectations that shape access to education, health services, and institutional support, often relying on family and community networks when mainstream services are inaccessible or culturally misaligned (Shields and Lujan 12). Kalchos et al. further observe that school environments can reproduce systemic marginalization through discrimination, cultural misunderstanding, and the underutilization of psychosocial support (309). Feminist migration scholarship highlights how gendered divisions of care and emotional labour shape integration processes (Hynie "Refugee Integration" 14), yet these insights are rarely applied to female youth who simultaneously act as daughters, interpreters, and caregivers (Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 14–16; Gyan et al. 6). As a result, the literature offers only a partial understanding of how young refugee women sustain family cohesion and personal identity amid competing cultural expectations.

Although resilience is central to youth integration research, it remains conceptually underdeveloped. Gyan et al. show that refugee and immigrant youth understand resilience as navigating exclusion while reconstructing identity and maintaining cultural connections (3). At the same time, it has been documented that strong educational and health outcomes are associated with persistent stress, mental health challenges, and barriers to accessing settlement services (Shields and Lujan v). Taken together, these analyses emphasize resilience as an outcome or personal capacity but rarely examine how such pressures are managed relationally within families, particularly through the emotional and caregiving labour performed by young women.

Hynie's broader relational framework—conceptualizing integration as mutual adaptation between newcomers and host societies—offers a lens for addressing these omissions ("Refugee Integration" 273). Applied to youth, this framework highlights the bidirectional labour that young refugees perform as they interpret institutions for parents and translate familial expectations into new social contexts. This negotiation is particularly gendered among young women, who serve as both protectors of tradition and navigators of change. However, current integration frameworks

continue to overlook this invisible emotional and cultural labour by focusing predominantly on economic participation or service access.

Taken as a whole, the literature indicates that Canadian scholarship on immigrant and refugee youth offers valuable empirical insights into agency and adaptability but remains limited in its theorization of the affective, cultural, and gendered dimensions of integration. Few studies adopt an intersectional feminist lens to examine how power operates across age, ethnicity, and gender, and research on Karen refugee communities in Canada has primarily focused on adult resettlement, mental health, or collective identity reconstruction (Clark, Marchbank et al., Erdogan). By centering the narratives of young Karen women in London, Ontario, my study addresses these significant gaps by reconceptualizing integration as intergenerational negotiation embedded in care and cultural continuity, reframing resilience as a collective and gendered practice, and foregrounding young refugee women's emotional and relational labour as a central—rather than peripheral—dimension of integration.

3.6 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that refugee integration is a structurally mediated, relational, and deeply gendered process. While Canada's resettlement programs provide important institutional frameworks, persistent inequities in housing, employment, income security, childcare availability, and healthcare access indicate that integration outcomes are shaped more by structural conditions than by individual motivation. Scholarship across settlement studies, gender analysis, and youth integration research consistently demonstrates that refugee women and girls navigate these conditions within complex matrices of caregiving responsibility, intergenerational expectations, and cultural continuity. However, despite this growing body of work, several critical gaps remain.

First, existing research insufficiently addresses the gendered and intersectional impacts of displacement and resettlement on women who have migrated from war-affected regions, particularly those from protracted refugee situations like the Karen. While studies highlight trauma, role renegotiation, and caregiving burdens, they rarely examine how gender, ethnicity, class, religion, legal status, and age interact to shape women lived experiences of integration across time. Nor do they fully explore whether women themselves perceive gendered expectations as sources of stress, resilience, empowerment, or constraint. This gap directly informs Dissertation

Question 1, which asks how Karen refugee mothers and daughters experience and respond to adversity, and how gender roles are perceived and negotiated across generations.

Second, although integration is widely conceptualized as a dynamic and relational process, scholarship on how refugee women actively interpret and shape integration across generations remains limited. Most research focuses either on institutional frameworks or on individual outcomes, overlooking how women exercise agency through cultural transmission, caregiving practices, and everyday negotiations of belonging. Even when women's agency is acknowledged, it is often framed in narrow terms—such as paid work or public activism—rather than through the relational, moral, and culturally grounded practices that sustain family and community life. This gap aligns with Dissertation Question 2, which investigates how Karen refugee women across two generations experience, interpret, and enact integration differently, and how their practices reshape dominant understandings of the process.

Third, while the literature on refugee youth integration is expanding, it remains limited in its attention to gendered youth agency and intergenerational labour. Studies increasingly recognize youth as cultural brokers and interpreters. However, they seldom analyze how these responsibilities fall disproportionately on young women, or how girls mobilize emotional, linguistic, and caregiving labour to support family resettlement. The affective dimensions of this work—stress, pride, conflict, or identity negotiation—also remain understudied. This oversight speaks directly to Dissertation Question 3, which examines the contributions young Karen women make to the integration of their families and the strategies they use to navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their parents and families?

In conclusion, the reviewed scholarship underscores the need for research that centers on the relational, cultural, and intergenerational experiences of refugee women and girls during integration. Existing frameworks insufficiently capture the nuanced ways Karen refugee mothers and daughters negotiate gender roles, mobilize cultural memory, sustain family well-being, and exercise agency amid structural constraints. By foregrounding participants' narratives, my study addresses these gaps and contributes a feminist, intersectional, and intergenerational analysis of Karen refugee women's experiences of integration in Canada. In doing so, it reframes integration not as an individual outcome, but as an ongoing, culturally embedded, and gendered process shaped by both structural conditions and the everyday practices of women and girls who rebuild family and community life in resettlement.

CHAPTER FOUR

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality, Motherwork, and Decentered Integration

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter develops a six-part theoretical foundation for analyzing the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women across two generations. Firstly, I begin the chapter by interrogating dominant refugee integration models, which are often defined through narrow, linear, and state-centric benchmarks such as employment, language acquisition, and civic participation. Drawing on critical scholarship, I demonstrate how these frameworks obscure structural inequalities and reinforce gendered invisibilities by devaluing caregiving, cultural transmission, and community-building practices. Building on Nira Yuval-Davis's theorization of the *politics of belonging* and Jay Marlowe's framing of belonging as relational and transnational, I demonstrate how integration discourses overlook the affective and cultural dimensions that sustain refugee women's lives. By centering these everyday strategies, I advance an alternative framework of integration that foregrounds reciprocity and negotiated belonging. This provides the foundation for examining how intergenerational dynamics among Karen refugee women complicate and challenge linear settlement models.

In the second section, I examine how Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the matrix of domination provide critical tools for analyzing the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of refugee women's resettlement. It explores how intersecting systems of oppression—shaped by legal status, race, gender, and migration history—create both structural barriers and spaces for agency in the lives of refugee women in Canada. By situating these frameworks within the context of forced migration studies, I highlight how power operates across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains, while also acknowledging culturally grounded forms of resistance and empowerment.

In the third section, I examine refugee mothering practices as forms of intersectional resistance. Although caregiving is often framed as a private or apolitical responsibility, such perspectives overlook its broader social and political significance for refugee and immigrant women whose motherwork sustains families, communities, and cultural continuity under displacement. Drawing on matricentric feminism and Black feminist thought, this section conceptualizes mothering as a socially structured and politicized practice shaped by intersecting

systems of gender, race, class, and migration status. Within this framework, caregiving, cultural transmission, and collective caregiving networks emerge as key strategies through which refugee mothers navigate structural constraints and exercise agency.

In the fourth section, I engage Michaela Hynie's (2024) decentering integration framework, which reframes refugee settlement as an intersectional, relational process shaped by gender, social identity, personal history, and institutional adaptability. Challenging assimilationist (expecting conformity to dominant norms), outcome-driven models that privilege economic productivity and language proficiency, Hynie foregrounds caregiving, cultural continuity, and subjective belonging as equally valid forms of integration. Her circular, multi-domain model—encompassing functional, social, interactional, subjective, and institutional dimensions—provides a holistic analytical lens for understanding Karen refugee women's settlement as an ongoing negotiation of belonging, care, and recognition, rather than a linear progression toward conformity.

The fifth section synthesizes these theoretical approaches to expose key gaps in the literature on intersectionality, refugee integration, and gendered displacement. It critiques the tendency to portray refugee populations as homogenous, the superficial inclusion of gender without examining underlying power structures, and the persistence of binary narratives that depict refugee women either as passive victims or as self-reliant success stories. The section further emphasizes the ongoing marginalization of refugee women's epistemic authority in both academic and policy discourse, underscoring the urgency of participatory, community-based approaches that center their lived experiences and situated knowledge.

Finally, the sixth section brings together intersectionality, Collins' matrix of domination, matricentric feminism, and Hynie's decentering integration framework to articulate an intersectional, gender-responsive model of refugee integration. By foregrounding refugee women's lived experiences and mothering practices as sites of both resilience and resistance, this synthesis challenges state-centric and assimilationist paradigms. Instead, it advances an understanding of integration as a negotiated, dynamic, and relational process—one that values belonging, caregiving, and cultural continuity as central to refugees' well-being and agency. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for the empirical chapters, where the intergenerational settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, illustrate how these dynamics unfold in practice.

4.2 Rethinking Dominant Refugee Integration Models

Mainstream refugee integration models have long operated within state-centric, linear frameworks, often conceptualizing integration as a unidirectional process of adaptation to host society norms. These models typically prioritize economic outcomes — such as labour market participation, educational attainment, and language proficiency — as primary indicators of successful integration (Ager and Strang 170–71). Such approaches frame integration as an individual's ability to meet pre-established benchmarks tied to employment and productivity. However, these models have been widely criticized for their reductionist, oversimplified or narrow approach, which measures refugee integration only by employment rates and language skills, leaving out emotional well-being, cultural belonging, and community participation. Refugees in Canada are often portrayed as economic actors, with their integration assessed primarily through labour-market participation. In contrast, systemic barriers such as inaccessible labour market information, credential recognition hurdles, and reliance on survival jobs remain overlooked (Labour Market Information Council). Focusing on quantifiable metrics risks erasing the complexities of refugee experiences and marginalizing forms of social participation that do not align with state priorities.

This problem is particularly acute for refugee women. Integration policies and research often emphasize male-coded metrics of success—such as employment, income generation, and civic participation—while overlooking or devaluing caregiving, community organizing, and cultural continuity work, which women typically perform. The result is a persistent gendered invisibility, whereby women's social and emotional contributions are seen as irrelevant to integration outcomes, or worse, as signs of failure to integrate (Koyama 172–74; Phillimore 582–86). Language acquisition further illustrates these blind spots. Policies assume that all refugees can and should acquire host-country language skills rapidly, without accounting for the disproportionate barriers faced by women, especially those who are caregivers or trauma survivors. Rather than empowering women, language requirements often function as exclusionary gatekeeping mechanisms, reinforcing dependency and marginalization (Koyama 71–73; Phillimore 583–85).

A growing body of research challenges these narrow frameworks by highlighting the importance of subjective belonging, institutional adaptability, and social capital. In their study of Government-Assisted Refugees across six Ontario cities, Hynie, Korn, and Tao demonstrate that integration depends not only on refugees' individual capacities but also on the degree of

community welcome—shaped by positive local attitudes and inclusive public discourse that affirms and supports refugees (188). Their proposed "Holistic Integration Model" extends beyond functional benchmarks to include three interdependent dimensions: subjective experiences of belonging and acceptance, objective resources such as language and education, and the institutional and social environments that mediate access to these resources (187, 191). Crucially, they demonstrate that integration is a relational and reciprocal process, rather than a neutral one of individual adaptation. Refugees' well-being depends not only on their ability to learn English or secure employment, but also on whether they feel socially included and whether institutions adapt their practices to meet the realities of refugees (191–92). For example, although some service providers demonstrated flexibility by adjusting to refugees' trauma histories and language needs, many bureaucratic systems remained rigid. Practices such as rejecting documents, including travel documents and birth certificates, that did not conform to Canadian formats created significant obstacles for refugees' settlement (199).

As Hynie, Korn, and Tao demonstrate, dominant integration models fail not only at the theoretical level but also in practice, because they overlook the role of institutions. This neglect hides how inflexible systems and negative attitudes in host societies continue to reinforce exclusion. Overall, mainstream frameworks impose a narrow, Eurocentric developmentalist vision that overlooks the everyday practices and relational strategies through which refugee women establish meaningful lives. Hynie underscores that these frameworks are also shaped by public imaginaries of refugees as burdens on host societies, particularly in high-income countries where debates often revolve around perceived strains on jobs, healthcare, housing, and education. Such deficit-oriented perspectives construe integration as a cost-containment exercise rather than a dynamic, reciprocal process. Moreover, short-term policies that restrict financial support or pressure refugees into rapid employment frequently undermine long-term integration outcomes by limiting opportunities for language acquisition and skill development, thereby reproducing the very dependency they claim to address (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 267).

At the heart of these concerns lies the question of power. Who has the authority to define integration, and whose interests are advanced by dominant models? For refugee women, these disciplining frameworks not only erase caregiving as a legitimate form of social participation but also reinforce racialized and colonial narratives that cast them as passive, traditional, or in need of rescue. In this sense, integration is revealed not as an inclusive pathway but as a disciplinary project

that legitimizes exclusion under the guise of civic incorporation. Together, these critiques highlight how dominant integration frameworks discipline refugees through narrow economic logics, while simultaneously erasing the emotional, cultural, and relational practices that sustain their sense of belonging.

A further limitation of mainstream models is their failure to account for the affective, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of settlement. As Nira Yuval-Davis emphasizes, "belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way" (201). Belonging, she argues, is never reducible to legal status or labour-market participation but is embedded in everyday identity practices, memories, and attachments (202–03). Nevertheless, these forms of belonging are continually contested through what Yuval-Davis calls the politics of belonging—"the dirty work of boundary maintenance" (204)—where hegemonic political powers reproduce community boundaries while other political actors simultaneously contest and challenge them (205). In this sense, the politics of belonging exposes how struggles over who counts as "us" or "them" are not neutral but are deeply bound up with power, values, and social location, revealing that integration is never simply a matter of inclusion but always a contested, political process.

Belonging, as Jay Marlowe emphasizes, is rarely stable or singular; instead, it shifts across time, relationships, and contexts. It may appear "seemingly stable and fixed" or "fleeting, changeable and contradictory" depending on lived experiences and social conditions (Marlowe 39). For refugees, belonging becomes most visible and politicized when it is threatened, exposing the complex intersections of place, identity, and power. Marlowe underscores how these dynamics operate across "social locations, people's identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political value systems" (42). This framework resonates closely with Nira Yuval-Davis's notion of the "politics of belonging." Yuval-Davis highlights that the politics of belonging is not only about the "maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers" but also about their contestation and challenge by marginalized actors (204–05). Taken together, these perspectives reveal that refugee women's settlement cannot be reduced to legal status or economic participation; instead, it involves navigating the contested boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, which are simultaneously shaped by structural power and everyday attachments. This lens is crucial for analyzing the intergenerational settlement of Karen refugee women in Canada, where their practices of cultural transmission, caregiving, and identity

negotiation engage both the affective dimensions of belonging and the structural constraints of boundary maintenance.

These critiques resonate strongly in the Canadian context, where refugee women often articulate integration not through rapid labour market participation but through caregiving, cultural transmission, and community building. Practices such as teaching children their mother tongue, sustaining religious and cultural traditions, or organizing community events reflect what Yuval-Davis identifies as the everyday politics of identity and what Marlowe frames as belonging that is transnational, negotiated, and relational. Yet because these contributions do not conform to state-defined integration metrics, they are frequently undervalued or rendered invisible within policy frameworks. When institutional models ignore these affective and cultural dimensions, they not only fail to capture the lived realities of refugee women but also actively reproduce exclusion by shaping funding priorities, service provision, and public narratives of what integration ought to mean.

Integration, therefore, cannot be reduced to economic benchmarks set by the state. It must instead be understood through intersectional frameworks that account for how gender, race, and legal status shape everyday practices of belonging. By centering caregiving, cultural continuity, and affective strategies, my dissertation advances an alternative vision of integration—one rooted in reciprocity, interdependence, and negotiated belonging rather than assimilationist expectations. This framework also allows me to examine how older and younger Karen refugee women in Canada differently enact and interpret these practices, revealing intergenerational dynamics that complicate linear models of integration.

4.3. Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination

The concept of intersectionality, first theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes how individuals experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression based on race, gender, class, legal status, and other social categories. In her seminal essay *Mapping the Margins*, she critiques single-axis analyses that focus exclusively on either race or gender, noting that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (1242). Intersectionality reveals how dominant systems overlook complex social locations, particularly those of women of colour and stateless or displaced individuals. Crenshaw demonstrates that focusing on one dimension of

identity obscures the realities of those situated at the intersection of multiple oppressions, emphasizing that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.

Her work shows how legal and policy frameworks marginalize individuals who do not fit neatly into singular identity categories, producing what she terms structural invisibility, and calls for multidimensional approaches that account for the complexity of identity and power (1244). In the context of forced migration, this framework illuminates how systems of border control, legal status, and patriarchal norms interact to shape refugee women's lived realities, with racialized refugee women often marginalized not simply as migrants or as women, but through the compounded effects of both identities.

Building on Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins expands intersectionality to encompass not only legal and structural barriers but also knowledge systems, cultural practices, and the politics of empowerment. She develops the concept of the matrix of domination, referring to the interlocking systems of oppression—race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation—that organize social relations across four domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. Collins emphasizes that race, class, and gender should be understood as mutually constructing axes of oppression, which requires a relational rather than an additive modle—one that recognizes how these systems of power intersect and co-produce one another, rather than simply accumulating as separate disadvantages (21).

As an Indigenous ethnic minority from Myanmar, the Karen people have endured decades of persecution, militarized violence, and protracted statelessness in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border (Karen Women's Organization). These histories exemplify the intersecting oppressions that intersectionality and Black feminist thought seek to illuminate, oppressions that are simultaneously structural and embodied, historical and ongoing. Collins reconceptualizes both domination and resistance through a Black feminist epistemology that privileges lived experience, dialogue, and community-based knowledge, contending that African-American women have long been compelled to develop alternative ways of assessing truth because dominant epistemological frameworks excluded them (288). For refugee women, whose narratives are often marginalized in both policy and academia, this insistence on valuing embodied and situated knowledge is especially critical.

Collins also calls for moving beyond binary distinctions between victimhood and resistance. Through her concept of the outsider-within, she highlights the complex positionality of

marginalized groups who are simultaneously included in yet excluded from dominant institutions. As she explains, "being in outsider-within locations can foster new angles of vision on oppression" (14), and the particular experiences of living as Black women in the United States can generate a distinctive consciousness about both their own lives and the broader society (27). This positionality offers unique insights that not only challenge hegemonic ideologies—the dominant norms and belief systems that sustain existing power structures—but also create openings for agency.

In the culminating chapter of *Black Feminist Thought*, "Toward a Politics of Empowerment," Collins outlines how intersecting oppressions can be resisted through personal, collective, and institutional transformation. She emphasizes that empowerment necessitates grappling with the complexity of intersecting oppressions and their interplay across structural, interpersonal, disciplinary, and hegemonic domains of power. Within this framework, the "outsider-within" status of marginalized women opens new angles of vision, generating creative insights and opportunities to foster social justice. For instance, African American women entering institutions that once excluded them can use their outsider standpoint to critique and reimagine those spaces. Yet Collins cautions that when organizations value women's outsider-within perspectives only as a marketable form of "diversity," they strip them of their transformative potential. In such cases, outsider-within knowledge is commodified—as a resource to make institutions appear inclusive—while the women who generate that knowledge remain structurally marginalized. True empowerment, she argues, requires resisting this dynamic and building collective forms of action that link knowledge, accountability, and agency to lasting social change (Collins 308-09).

This warning resonates with refugee women's experiences in Canada, where their situated knowledge and caregiving practices often go unrecognized within mainstream integration frameworks. As Hynie observes in "Refugee Integration: Research and Policy," prevailing models frequently privilege economic participation and formal benchmarks over community knowledge, thereby overlooking the embodied and relational forms of resistance that refugee women enact in everyday life (*Refugee Integration* 267). Linking Collins's insights to these dynamics highlights how valuing marginalized women's epistemologies can expose the limits of dominant models and affirm refugee women's agency within oppressive structures.

Collins synthesizes two key approaches to power. The first is *dialectical*, linking oppression and activism through the premise that social change results from human agency.

“Because African-American women remain relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy from one generation to the next,” she observes, “U.S. Black women have a vested interest in opposing oppression. This is not an intellectual issue... it is a lived reality” (292). The second approach is s*ubjectivity*, which views power as diffuse and circulating within a matrix to which individuals relate differently. Here, power is not possessed but experienced through everyday practices, affective relationships, and shifting self-definitions. She notes that individuals experience power differently based on context—“gender may be more prominent when she becomes a mother, her race when she searches for housing, her social class when she applies for credit, her citizenship status when she applies for a job” (293). This insight enables a nuanced understanding of how the subjectivities of refugee women can shift in response to their social location and context, reflecting dynamic negotiations of power and agency.

Crucially, Collins argues that “oppression is not simply understood in the mind—it is felt in the body in myriad ways” (293). In other words, Collins emphasizes that oppression is not only an abstract, intellectual, or discursive reality but also a lived, embodied experience. This aligns with feminist migration studies that explore how legal precarity, trauma, and bureaucratic surveillance manifest in bodily and emotional experiences. A woman may experience her gender more acutely during motherhood, her race when seeking housing, or her citizenship status when applying for work—all while navigating the residual effects of displacement and statelessness. According to Collins, the matrix of domination is organized through four interrelated domains:

- Structural: Large-scale institutions such as legal systems, labor markets, education, and housing that reproduce racialized and gendered subordination.
- Disciplinary: Bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance that regulate behavior within schools, hospitals, and workplaces, often invisibly.
- Hegemonic: Ideology, language, and culture that persuade people to internalize their subordination.
- Interpersonal: Everyday social interactions where power is enacted and resisted at the micro level (295–307).

These domains are interdependent. For example, legal segregation (structural) may be reinforced through school disciplinary policies (disciplinary), cultural stereotypes (hegemonic), and everyday acts of exclusion (interpersonal). Yet Collins emphasizes that these exact domains can become sites of empowerment. For instance, as she explains, women can act as **“**rule breakers

and rule benders**”**, disrupting institutional norms either through open defiance or by strategically manipulating the boundaries of what rules allow (295). Moreover, when Black women attain positions of authority, they sometimes become rule makers, altering the very structures that once excluded them. This framing is significant because it highlights how power operates dialectically: the same disciplinary systems that enforce marginalization can be reappropriated as sites of agency.

For refugee women in Canada, similar dynamics emerge in their encounters with settlement bureaucracies and integration frameworks. While policies often regulate their participation through rigid benchmarks of language acquisition and employment (Hynie, *Refugee Integration* 267), many women challenge these constraints by bending rules—such as informally mobilizing kinship networks to access housing or childcare—or by breaking expectations of passivity through activism and leadership. In some cases, they also enter policymaking or community leadership roles, positioning themselves as rule makers who can reshape integration practices. This reflects Yuval-Davis’s broader discussion of the politics of belonging, which highlights how struggles over inclusion and exclusion are deeply gendered and intersectional (200–201). By extending Collins’s insight, we can see how marginalized women do not simply absorb domination but actively navigate, resist, and reconfigure the disciplinary rules that govern their lives, thereby carving out space for empowerment within systems designed to constrain them.

Ultimately, Collins calls for redefining power and empowerment beyond rigid binaries—such as victim versus agent or oppressed versus oppressor —toward more dynamic, accountable, and collective forms of action that reflect the complexity of marginalized women’s lived experiences. Black feminist thought, in this sense, is not merely an academic endeavour—it is a social justice project aimed at transforming knowledge, institutions, and lived realities. This framework is particularly generative for analyzing displacement. Collins’s framework equips scholars with conceptual vocabulary and analytical categories to examine how oppression operates across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal dimensions of power, while also highlighting how empowerment can emerge through relational, community-based, and transnational practices. As Collins reminds us, “The existence of Black feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be” (309). Recognizing this interplay between constraint and agency allows for a more nuanced, ethical, and justice-oriented understanding of the settlement experiences of displaced women.

Although intersectionality has transformative potential, its application in migration and refugee research is often superficial—reduced to enumerating intersecting identities such as "racialized, poor, and female" without analyzing the power structures that shape those positions. This reductionist use of intersectionality risks treating it as a checklist of identities rather than a framework for interrogating relational power dynamics and structural inequality. Moreover, such applications frequently neglect cultural specificity. Refugee women from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as Karen women from Myanmar, may experience and interpret gender, motherhood, and community differently from Western liberal norms. As Collins reminds us, mainstream frameworks often impose Eurocentric understandings of empowerment and resistance, overlooking culturally grounded forms of agency—such as caregiving or faith-based resilience—as legitimate practices of resistance (271, 317).

Crenshaw and Collins both caution against depoliticizing intersectionality. Collins rejects additive models of oppression that suggest the "more subordinated the group, the purer the vision available to them," emphasizing instead that *"*each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge" (290). Instead, Collins insists that all groups produce partial and situated knowledges, which become more powerful in dialogue and accountability with one another. This is especially relevant in refugee research, as displaced women's narratives cannot be reduced to data points or extracted without attending to their epistemic authority. For this dissertation, intersectionality is mobilized as both an analytic and a method—not only to map intersecting oppressions but also to foreground refugee women's voices, relational practices, and everyday strategies of survival as vital, situated knowledges. In doing so, I argue that their standpoint produces truths that unsettle dominant integration models and reframe agency and belonging as collective, culturally embedded practices of resistance.

4.4. Refugee Mothering Practices as Intersectional Resistance

There is a clear distinction between motherhood and mothering. Adrienne Rich theorizes motherhood as a male-defined patriarchal institution that regulates women's reproductive and domestic labour, reinforces traditional gender roles, and limits women's autonomy (7). Similarly, Andrea O'Reilly defines motherhood as a male-constructed concept governed by patriarchal institutions and deeply oppressive to women. In contrast, mothering is female-defined, woman-centred, and potentially empowering ("Feminist Mothering" 185). O'Reilly further argues that

motherhood is not merely a natural or biological function but a cultural practice continuously reshaped by changing socioeconomic conditions, whose meanings vary across time and place ("Matricentric Feminism" 16).

These culturally constructed maternal practices do not occur in isolation. For migrant and refugee mothers, expectations about themselves and their children are continually renegotiated within unfamiliar and often restrictive social environments. Examining intersecting identities—such as race, gender, class, migration status, and socioeconomic position—is therefore essential for understanding the structural constraints and opportunities that shape their experiences. O'Reilly's concept of matricentric feminism, a mother-centered feminist framework, foregrounds motherwork as a site where oppression and resistance coexist. She argues that mothers are "oppressed under patriarchy as women and as mothers," and therefore maternal labour must be theorized as a critical locus of struggle, negotiation, and agency (O'Reilly 2).

Unlike maternalism, which naturalizes caregiving as instinct, matricentric feminism emphasizes that mothering is socially and historically constructed, requiring skills, knowledge, and relational labour (O'Reilly 4). By framing mothering as both devalued and indispensable, O'Reilly highlights its potential as socially engaged labour capable of political transformation. Her project seeks "to unmask motherhood by documenting the lived reality of mothering" (5), thereby revealing how everyday maternal practices can challenge dominant assumptions about women's roles. Within this framework, caregiving becomes more than private family labour; it becomes a socially meaningful practice that can resist marginalization and assert the political significance of care in contexts marked by inequality (O'Reilly 7).

O'Reilly further develops this perspective through the concept of feminist mothering, which she defines as an oppositional discourse constructed as a "negation of patriarchal motherhood" (137). Rather than prescribing a fixed model of maternal behaviour, feminist mothering emerges through mothers' everyday practices that challenge dominant myths about motherhood. Drawing on Tuula Gordon's work, O'Reilly explains that feminist mothers assert their right to participate in paid work, teach their children anti-sexist and anti-racist values, expect shared parental responsibility, and engage in political life. Feminist mothering, therefore, connects personal experience with broader feminist commitments, transforming maternal labour into a form of critical social practice. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to refugee mothers whose maternal roles are shaped by displacement, legal precarity, and systemic marginalization.

In contexts of forced migration, maternal labour often becomes a crucial survival strategy. Refugee mothers must navigate the pressures of settlement systems, racialization, and cultural loss while simultaneously ensuring the well-being of their children. Research on families fleeing war zones shows that maternal responsibilities frequently expand during conflict and displacement. When men are injured, disappear, or lose access to livelihoods, women often assume expanded responsibilities, reshaping marital relationships and challenging normative gender hierarchies. Importantly, these shifts occur not because women's views on gender have fundamentally changed, but because protecting their children becomes the overriding priority—highlighting how quickly gender norms can destabilize during crisis (Ashbourne et al. 119). These dynamics resonate with Patricia Hill Collins's analysis of Black motherhood as a form of survival-oriented labour. Collins argues that mothers protect children from racism, teach them strategies of self-protection, and transmit cultural knowledge that enables them to navigate hostile social environments (Collins, "Meaning of Motherhood" 7). In this sense, maternal practices function not only as caregiving but also as strategies of resilience and resistance.

Collins further conceptualizes motherhood as a contradictory social institution that embodies both domination and empowerment. She explains that controlling images—such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare mother—have historically been used to regulate Black women's sexuality, fertility, and maternal practices within racialized and gendered systems of domination (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought" 190). At the same time, within African American communities, motherhood has served as a crucial site of resistance through communal caregiving and collective survival strategies. The practice of "othermothering," in which women share caregiving responsibilities across extended kinship and community networks, enables mothers to support children's development while fostering women's autonomy and collective empowerment (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought" 192). Mothering, therefore, becomes a contested terrain where structural oppression and resistant maternal practices intersect.

The concept of othermothering resonates strongly with the experiences of refugee communities, where displacement often disrupts nuclear family structures and necessitates collective caregiving networks. Nancy Clark's study of Karen refugee women in Canada demonstrates how structural barriers within settlement systems shape maternal experiences. The lack of interpreters, for example, led some mothers to be judged as "inadequate" caregivers by institutional authorities (240). Settlement services also reinforced gendered expectations by

positioning women primarily as caregivers while framing men as breadwinners, thereby reproducing gender inequalities within resettlement contexts (262). Despite these constraints, Karen women relied on collective caregiving networks and intergenerational forms of othermothering to sustain family well-being and community resilience. Similarly, Kanal and Rottmann suggest that refugee women's cultural and relational labour is often misinterpreted as passivity, even though it constitutes an important form of agency and social contribution (2).

For refugee mothers, caregiving is also an embodied experience shaped by the pressures of displacement and resettlement. Collins notes that oppression is "felt in the body in myriad ways" (Collins, "Black Feminist Thought" 293). This observation aligns with Beiser and Hou's findings that refugee women's mental health is strongly influenced by resettlement stressors such as caregiving burdens, language barriers, and cultural dislocation (98). Research also shows that refugee mothers often define their well-being through their children's and family members' experiences. Syrian refugee women, for example, described how discrimination, bullying, or economic hardship affected their children directly undermined their sense of maternal competence and self-worth (Kanal and Rottmann 7). At the same time, mothers frequently attempt to preserve cultural and religious traditions within the family, expressing concern that resettlement may weaken children's cultural identities (Ashbourne et al. 122–123). According to Clark, for Karen refugee women, maternal labour occurs within conditions of legal uncertainty, limited employment opportunities, and cultural marginalization. Yet their mothering practices—including cultural preservation, language transmission, and shared childcare—also serve as mechanisms of resilience and collective survival (Clark 123). In these contexts, caregiving becomes both emotional labour and a relational strategy through which families maintain cultural continuity and social stability.

In sum, matricentric feminism and Black feminist thought provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding refugee mothering practices as forms of intersectional resistance. These perspectives reveal that maternal labour is not simply a private responsibility but a socially embedded practice shaped by intersecting systems of power. For refugee women, caregiving functions as a relational strategy that sustains family survival, transmits cultural knowledge, and challenges marginalization within settlement contexts. By foregrounding maternal knowledge, community networks, and everyday practices of care, this framework illuminates how refugee mothers transform caregiving into a meaningful site of resilience, agency, and resistance amid displacement and resettlement.

4.5 Decentering Integration: Hynie's Intersectional Framework

Michaela Hynie's (2024) *From the Outside In* offers a critical rethinking of refugee integration in Canada, challenging universalist assumptions that portray integration as a neutral or linear process. She argues that the term "integration" is deployed differently depending on the speaker and context, often grounded in "unacknowledged social imaginaries of a homogenous and unchanging settlement society" (319). Such imaginaries sustain assimilationist expectations that measure refugee success against Eurocentric and market-oriented norms, obscuring the realities of those—particularly refugee women—whose contributions fall outside narrow economic or linguistic benchmarks.

Mainstream integration models frequently prioritize labour market participation and educational attainment as the primary indicators of successful settlement (Ager and Strang; Beiser et al.; Schneider and Crul). While these measures are linked to social participation, they often overlook the structural barriers refugees face, including interrupted education, limited access to language training, and the compounded effects of trauma (Hynie 322). Refugees may value employment as a goal, yet their pathways toward it are shaped by systemic limitations and the emotional toll of resettlement (Ahmad et al.; Bridekirk et al., cited in Hynie 322). For Karen refugee women, whose pre-migration lives often included protracted displacement in Thai refugee camps with minimal formal schooling, such metrics place an undue burden and risk misrepresenting them as "failing to integrate." This framing disregards their caregiving, cultural knowledge, and community-based survival strategies, all of which play vital roles in sustaining family and community life.

Hynie foregrounds *social integration* as an equally critical but less easily quantifiable dimension of refugee settlement. Unlike economic benchmarks, social integration encompasses both structural participation in social life and subjective experiences of attachment, safety, and recognition. Concepts such as social inclusion, community cohesion, and belonging highlight not only access to social roles and resources but also the emotional dimensions of feeling accepted and valued within a community (Mulvey, 2010; Cardinali et al., 2022; Marlowe, 2020; Hynie 323–24). This broader framing underscores that integration is not reducible to employment or language acquisition alone but must also account for refugees' capacity to cultivate meaningful relationships, sustain cultural continuity, and experience a sense of belonging in their host societies.

Drawing on Antonsich, she emphasizes that belonging is relational, arising not only from legal status or social networks but also from familiarity, safety, and the ability to engage in meaningful cultural practices (Hynie 325). Within this framework, refugee women's everyday practices of caregiving, homemaking, and cultural continuity—activities often overlooked in state-centric assessments—emerge as significant forms of agency and social participation, as shown in how Syrian women in Turkey rebuild family life, sustain religious coping, and forge neighborly ties under displacement (Kanal and Rottmann 8–9). These practices challenge framing integration solely in terms of economic productivity, instead highlighting that meaningful integration is better understood through the relationships, cultural ties, and gendered forms of care that sustain both families and communities.

Language acquisition, another cornerstone of mainstream integration, also requires an intersectional lens. Research shows that language proficiency is tied not only to employment and access to services but also to broader dimensions of belonging and social well-being (Paquet and Xhardez, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2021; Hynie, Korn, and Tao, 2016). Hynie emphasizes that language functions as a form of social power, shaping whether refugees are recognized, respected, and included in community life (325). However, for refugee women with trauma, low literacy, or caregiving burdens, strict language requirements often serve less as opportunities for empowerment and more as barriers that deny them access to rights, resources, and belonging. Such policies overlook the embodied, emotional, and contextual realities that contour women's integration trajectories, reducing language to a neutral skill while ignoring its structural and relational dimensions.

Intersectionality lies at the heart of Hynie's framework. Drawing on Atewologun (2018), she defines integration as an "intersectional process" shaped by socio-economic context, personal history, and intersecting identities such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and migration history (326). Hynie's research highlights how integration expectations are unevenly applied: across several refugee groups in Canada, women commonly identified family unity as the primary marker of "feeling at home," whereas men tended to prioritize employment (Hynie, Korn, and Tao 2016; Hynie et al., forthcoming, cited in Hynie 327). Among highly educated and professional women, however, employment was reported as the primary goal of integration, although caregiving responsibilities continued to limit participation, with 15 percent of women indicating that they were not working because they were caring for their families (Hynie 327). These findings highlight

the gendered nature of integration assessments and underscore the need for models that value caregiving alongside economic productivity as legitimate contributions to the settlement process.

Hynie's holistic, circular model expands on Ager and Strang's framework by incorporating five interconnected domains: (i) *functional integration* (employment, education, housing, health care), (ii) *social integration* (bonds within co-ethnic networks and bridges across communities, as well as public attitudes), (iii) *interactional integration* (language and cultural adaptation), (iv) *subjective integration* (psychological well-being, safety, belonging), and *institutional adaptation* (system responsiveness and inclusivity) (331-32). The model situates integration as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay between individual characteristics and institutional structures, emphasizing that "the process and outcomes of integration are not solely determined by the motivation, activities, and attitudes of refugee newcomers" but also by the accessibility and adaptability of systems (328).

Applied to the experiences of Karen refugee women, Hynie's intersectional model of integration reframes caregiving, intergenerational care, and cultural transmission as valid and agentic contributions to settlement. It also calls for institutional accountability to ensure that these practices are not dismissed as private or apolitical, but are recognized and valued as central to community resilience and social participation. By decentering integration from assimilationist ideals and grounding it in intersectional, relational, and refugee-centred perspectives, Hynie's approach provides conceptual tools that align with my dissertation's aim: to analyze Karen women's settlement not as a linear progression toward conformity, but as an ongoing negotiation of belonging, care, and recognition in the face of structural inequities.

4.6 Intersectionality, Refugee Integration, and Gendered Displacement: Key Gaps

Intersectionality has become a foundational framework in feminist, critical race, and migration studies, providing a powerful lens to examine how race, gender, class, legal status, and other social categories intersect to shape the lived realities of refugee women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's critique of single-axis analyses in both feminist and antiracist discourse highlights how focusing on one dimension of identity can obscure the experiences of those positioned at the intersection of multiple oppressions, particularly women of colour (1241, 1244). Her work demonstrates how legal and policy frameworks often render such women structurally invisible, underscoring the need for multidimensional approaches that address the complexity of identity and power.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins advances this analysis through her concept of the *matrix of domination*, which encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions while recognizing their diverse local manifestations (246). She further develops this framework through *standpoint epistemology*, emphasizing that marginalized groups, by virtue of their social position, generate distinct and valuable ways of knowing (289). Collins also describes Black feminist thought as a form of "subjugated knowledge" that challenges the authority of dominant paradigms and exposes how power shapes what is accepted as truth (269–70). This epistemic justice lens is particularly relevant to forced migration, where refugees are often positioned as objects of study rather than as producers of knowledge.

While these intersectional perspectives have significantly advanced scholarship on refugee settlement, important gaps remain. Krause and Schmidt show that global refugee policies and academic debates frequently reduce refugees to a rigid dichotomy—either portraying them as passive victims in need of protection or as resilient, self-reliant actors who embody successful integration (29). This binary framing obscures the structural violence, restrictive policy frameworks, and everyday insecurities that profoundly shape refugees' lives. It also conceals the diverse strategies of resistance and care through which refugees navigate displacement and reconstruct community. By challenging these reductive representations, Krause and Schmidt advocate for approaches that acknowledge refugees as complex social actors whose contributions extend far beyond the narrow lens of economic self-reliance.

This binary is further gendered, reproducing a persistent gap in how refugee men and women are positioned within integration frameworks. Men are more often assessed through their economic productivity, whereas women are judged primarily by their caregiving and domestic roles. Settlement systems frequently measure women's integration indirectly—through their children's schooling, language acquisition, or social adjustment—while disregarding their own well-being and agency (O'Reilly 146). As studies of Karen refugee women illustrate, this bias renders mothers vulnerable to being labeled "inadequate" when structural barriers, such as the absence of interpreters, undermine their ability to meet institutional expectations (Clark 240). At the same time, women's cultural and relational labour—such as intergenerational caregiving and "othermothering"—is routinely misread as passivity, despite functioning as vital strategies of resilience and survival (Kanal and Rottmann 2). Integration frameworks thus reproduce gendered

inequalities: while men's economic contributions are visible and rewarded, women's reproductive and community-based labour remains undervalued, depoliticized, and structurally marginalized.

Addressing these gaps requires research approaches that engage directly with refugees' lived experiences, treat them as active agents and knowledge producers, and attend to the ways multiple axes of identity interact in specific contexts. This dissertation responds to that challenge by centring the voices of Karen refugee women and girls, exploring how displacement-related stressors vary across generations, and examining the distinct forms of agency exercised by older and younger women in shaping their own understandings of "successful settlement" in Canada.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that prevailing models of refugee integration are inadequate for capturing the complex and deeply gendered realities of refugee women's settlement experiences. By privileging narrow economic and linguistic benchmarks, dominant approaches reproduce racialized and gendered invisibilities, erasing the significance of caregiving, cultural preservation, and community participation as vital practices of belonging. Against this backdrop, I have advanced an alternative framework grounded in intersectionality, mothering practices, and decentered integration.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Collins's matrix of domination illuminate how multiple axes of power converge to create both barriers and opportunities in the lives of refugee women. These perspectives show that oppression is not additive but relational, operating simultaneously through structural inequalities, cultural discourses, and interpersonal relations. At the same time, they reveal the generative agency enacted through everyday practices such as caregiving, storytelling, and cultural transmission—practices that resist assimilationist erasures and sustain community resilience.

O'Reilly's matricentric feminism further deepens this analysis by reframing mothering as a political and activist practice, challenging its persistent marginalization in both feminist and migration scholarship. By positioning maternal labour as a structured, intersectional, and socially transformative form of work, matricentric feminism underscores its centrality to refugee women's survival and integration. Similarly, Hynie's decentered integration framework advances a holistic and relational model that values not only economic participation but also subjective well-being,

relational belonging, and institutional accountability. This approach unsettles linear narratives of settlement and instead conceives of integration as a reciprocal, multi-dimensional process.

Taken together, these perspectives demand a reconceptualization of integration as an ongoing negotiation of belonging, care, and recognition. Karen refugee women's settlement strategies—ranging from intergenerational caregiving and cultural transmission to community-building and grassroots activism—must be understood not as peripheral supports to integration but as central modes through which belonging and resilience are cultivated. By centering the voices of refugee women and situated knowledge, this framework challenges Eurocentric and assimilationist paradigms and demands recognition of cultural specificity, gendered labour, and contextual diversity.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework asserts that refugee women are not passive recipients of state policy but active agents shaping their own trajectories of settlement, identity, and justice. Their everyday practices of care and cultural preservation are influential acts of resistance that contest exclusionary boundaries and redefine what it means to belong. By foregrounding intersectional, feminist, and decentered perspectives, this framework provides the conceptual foundation for the chapters that follow, ensuring that the lived experiences of refugee women remain central to both scholarly debates and policy interventions on integration. In doing so, this dissertation not only addresses critical gaps in refugee integration scholarship but also advances a feminist, refugee-centred model of settlement that redefines integration as a site of resistance, resilience, and justice.

CHAPTER FIVE
Research Methodology

5.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I outline the methodological framework that guides my study of the gendered and intersectional settlement experiences of intergenerational Karen refugee women in Canada. In Section 5.2, I explain the qualitative, interpretive research approach adopted in this study, including its methodological foundations in intersectional and feminist theory. This section establishes how I approach participants' lived experiences, meaning-making processes, and the relational dimensions of integration across generations.

In Section 5.3, I discuss the ethical considerations that guided this research, including institutional ethics approval and informed consent procedures. Section 5.4 then details the measures I implemented to ensure participants' confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

In Section 5.5, I describe the criteria used for selecting participants, and in Section 5.6, I explain the sampling strategy, including the use of convenience and snowball sampling through community-based networks. Together, these sections outline how I identified and recruited participants in a culturally sensitive and relational manner.

In Section 5.7, I describe the structure and implementation of the interviews, including the two-part interview design and my field visits to London, Ontario. Section 5.8 outlines the procedures I followed for recording, interpreting, and transcribing interview data, highlighting the role of the bilingual research assistant and the steps taken to ensure data quality.

In Section 5.9, I reflect on my positionality as a researcher and examine how my identity and social positioning shaped access to participants, research relationships, and data interpretation. This is followed by Section 5.10, which presents my fieldwork reflections and cultural encounters, illustrating how trust-building, hospitality, and community dynamics influenced the research process.

In Section 5.11, I explain the data analysis process, focusing on my use of thematic analysis and how it aligns with the study's intersectional and feminist framework. Section 5.12 then discusses issues of reliability and validity, outlining how I addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the rigor of this study.

Finally, in Section 5.13, I acknowledge the study's methodological limitations, including constraints on sampling, language, positionality, and scope. By addressing these limitations, I aim to maintain transparency and strengthen the research's overall integrity.

5.2 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research approach to examine the gendered and intersectional settlement experiences of intergenerational Karen refugee women in Canada. Given the dissertation's focus on lived experiences, meaning-making, and everyday practices of integration, this approach is well-suited to capturing the depth, complexity, and nuance of participants' narratives. Qualitative research is inherently interpretive, as it seeks to understand the social world through the meanings and perspectives that individuals assign to their experiences (Bryman and Bell 163). Rather than aiming for generalizable or statistically representative findings, this study prioritizes rich, contextualized understandings of how refugee women navigate displacement, resettlement, and identity transformation across generations. It is grounded in the assumption that social realities are socially constructed and shaped through individual experiences, cultural contexts, and power relations.

In this framework, knowledge is co-produced through the interaction between the researcher and research participants, recognizing that participants are not passive subjects but active agents who interpret and give meaning to their own experiences (Willig 2). This approach aligns with my study's emphasis on centering refugee women's voices, particularly those that are often marginalized or underrepresented in dominant migration and integration discourses.

To further ground the analysis, this study is informed by an intersectional approach, which examines how multiple axes of identity—such as gender, age, migration status, language ability, and family roles—intersect to shape participants' settlement experiences. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Crenshaw and Collins, intersectionality enables a more nuanced understanding of how structural inequalities and power relations operate across different social locations. In this study, intersectionality is not only used as a theoretical lens but also as an analytical tool to explore how participants experience and respond to overlapping forms of marginalization and opportunity in the Canadian context.

In addition, this research adopts a feminist methodological approach that prioritizes participants' lived experiences, ethical engagement, and reflexivity. Feminist methodologies challenge dominant, male-centered forms of knowledge production by emphasizing situated knowledge and lived experience as central to understanding social reality (Saeidzadeh 187–88). In this study, this approach guides efforts to minimize hierarchical relationships between the researcher and participants, to recognize participants' knowledge as valid and authoritative, and to acknowledge the researcher's positionality in shaping the research process. It further recognizes that knowledge is co-produced through researcher–participant interactions and is shaped by underlying power relations, requiring continuous reflexivity throughout the research process (Saeidzadeh 198). This is particularly important given the sensitive nature of refugee experiences and the gendered dimensions of care, responsibility, and resilience explored in this dissertation.

Overall, this qualitative, interpretive, intersectional, and feminist research approach provides a coherent methodological foundation for examining the complex, relational, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee women's integration. It allows the study to move beyond state-centric or outcome-based models of integration and instead foreground the everyday practices, meanings, and forms of agency that shape how Karen refugee women understand and experience settlement in Canada.

5.3 Research Ethics and Informed Consent

Ethical approval for this research project was granted by York University's Office of Research Ethics (ORE). One month prior to the interview dates, both printed and electronic copies of a consent document were shared with participants. All materials, including the interview consent form and interview questions, were prepared in both English and Karen to ensure that participants fully understood the research process. A bilingual research assistant, introduced by a Karen community leader, provided translation support. For convenience, the documents were distributed via email and Canada Post. Participants were invited to ask questions or raise concerns about the study and the consent process. They were also asked to confirm their comfort with audio recording prior to the interviews, even after having provided written consent.

5.4 Maintaining Confidentiality and Anonymity

The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were ensured by coding all interview documents with respective pseudonyms. The real names of the participants do not appear in any report or publication about this research. At the end of the questionnaire (Part I), each participant was asked to choose a "pseudonym" to use in the individual interview transcripts. The researcher securely stores the data, both the electronic copy on a password-protected thumb drive and the physical copy in a locked cabinet, limiting access to only the researcher. The researcher intends to store the data for ten years before shredding it on July 15, 2034. The researcher saves the recordings (audio) in a password-protected file on the local computer, not on the cloud-based service.

5.5 Selecting participants

There are three specific requirements regarding the recruitment of interview participants (i.e., Karen refugee women): (i) They must be older than 25 and must be first-generation refugee women who relocated to Canada under the Government-assisted Refugee Program from Thai-Myanmar border refugee camps; (ii) Their marital status must be married or common-in-law, and they must have been in Canada for more than five years; and (iii) They must be living with their immediate family members such as spouses and children. Recently arrived Karen refugee women who are still dealing with settlement procedures are excluded from being interviewed. Excluding recently arrived Karen refugees allows me to focus on participants who have had more time to reflect on their experiences in Canada. Moreover, excluding single women and targeting women who are living with their immediate family members, such as spouses and children, ensures that I can explore the dynamics within the family unit, thereby providing an opportunity to understand how family and spousal relationships and responsibilities intersect with experiences of empowerment and resettlement. Overall, my recruitment criteria reflect a thoughtful and inclusive approach to research, recognizing the importance of capturing the diverse realities of Karen refugee women as both wives and mothers. This approach enriches the depth and breadth of my study findings, providing valuable insights into the complexities of empowerment within the context of family life and resettlement. Every participant was offered a CA$25 gift card for agreeing to take part in the study and for their time.

5.6 Sampling

Research participants were selected using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling (Bryman and Bell 245). This strategy is particularly appropriate for accessing hard-to-reach and community-based populations, such as refugee women, where trust, social networks, and cultural familiarity play a central role in recruitment. I approached Karen community leaders (both elders and youth), including men and women, as key informants to facilitate access to a diverse range of displaced Karen refugee families. In this study, key informants are defined as: (i) Karen community leaders who administer community-based organizations and hold positions of respect and trust; or (ii) Karen individuals who maintain active connections with Karen women through churches or community events. By relying on these established social networks, the sampling process enabled the identification of participants who may otherwise be difficult to reach through formal recruitment methods, while also supporting culturally sensitive and trust-based engagement.

Although no religious criteria were imposed during participant recruitment, and efforts were made to approach both Christian and non-Christian community leaders, all participants who ultimately agreed to take part in this study identified as either Baptist or Catholic. Most participants were connected to church-based networks and involved in community activities such as newcomer host programs, church fundraising, youth sports, and Karen-language schools. This outcome reflects the central role of church institutions as key sites of social organization, support, and communication within the Karen refugee community in Canada. At the same time, it indicates that the sample is shaped by these networks, which may limit the representation of Karen women who are not engaged in church-based or faith-centred community structures.

5.7 Interviews

The interview questions were structured into two parts. Part I, demographic and preliminary information about the research participants (i.e., Karen refugee women), designates multiple-choice and short-answer formats for simple recording. All the questions in Part I are the same for every participant, and it requires approximately 25-30 minutes to complete. Part I covers the following topics: the participant’s background information (years of settlement experience in Canada, age, employment information, spousal information, children's information, other questions related to perceptions of gender responsibilities in the family, and community connections and services they seek upon arrival in London).

For Part II, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide focusing on key themes, including stressors and coping strategies in relation to gender roles and responsibilities; family-related stressors; relocation-related stressors; and challenges associated with settlement services. Consistent with the flexible nature of semi-structured interviewing, I did not strictly follow the guide's sequence and, in some cases, omitted certain questions or introduced additional ones in response to participants' emphasis and emerging narratives. This approach enabled greater responsiveness to participants' experiences and the exploration of issues most meaningful to them (Bryman and Bell 199).

I conducted two field visits to London, Ontario, in July and August 2024, respectively. During the first visit, I collected signed consent forms and met with participants—some individually and others in small groups of close friends—at a participant's home to build rapport and foster trust and comfort before data collection. This initial engagement was particularly important given the Karen refugee population's relational and community-based nature. I then administered the Part I research questionnaire with the assistance of a designated interpreter, ensuring that participants could fully express their responses in their preferred language. This first visit was dedicated exclusively to completing the Part I questionnaire.

Although I initially intended to interview ten refugee women, I recruited eleven participants to ensure the sample would not fall short of the target in the event of withdrawals. Fortunately, all participants remained engaged throughout the entire interview process. After carefully reviewing the Part I data, I used this information to inform the development of the Part II semi-structured interview guide for each of the eleven participants. Accordingly, some interview questions were adapted to reflect participants' individual backgrounds and experiences. The face-to-face interviews were conducted during the second field visit at locations agreed upon by the participants, ensuring privacy, safety, and comfort. Each Part II interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

5.8 Recording, Interpreting and Transcribing Interviews

A bilingual interview assistant was recruited to provide interpretation for participants who required clarification before responding in English or who preferred to respond in Karen. I was interested not only in participants' responses but also in how they expressed them. To capture this, all interviews were recorded using a digital voice-activated recorder operated by the interview

assistant, allowing me to focus fully on conducting the interviews. This division of roles enhanced data quality by enabling greater attention to participants' verbal and nonverbal cues during the interview process. One week prior to the interviews, I provided the assistant with the recorder to test and ensure its usability.

During the interviews, the interviewer, interpreter, and participant each took turns speaking. The interpreter paused the recording while translating, capturing only the interviewer's questions and participants' responses. The majority of participants responded entirely in English; however, some who could speak Burmese chose to respond directly to me in Burmese for certain questions. As I do not speak Karen, I transcribed only the English portions of the interviews. All audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and organized under participants' pseudonyms.

5.9 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

I recognize that my position as a researcher is integral to the research process and that shapes knowledge production, relationships with participants, and the interpretation of data. Positionality refers to the researcher's social, cultural, and political positioning in relation to the research context and participants, influencing how knowledge is constructed and understood (Yip 222- 223). In qualitative research, this positioning affects not only access to participants but also the meanings co-produced through interaction. Rather than treating insider and outsider identities as fixed categories, this study adopts a relational and fluid understanding of positionality. Researchers move along a continuum of insiderness and outsiderness depending on context, relationships, and power dynamics (Yip 223). Similarly, Narayan challenges the rigid binary between "native" and "non-native" researchers, emphasizing that identities are shaped by multiple and shifting identifications that are constantly in flux (Narayan 671–72). Together, these perspectives highlight that positionality is dynamic, negotiated, and context-dependent.

My positionality reflects this complexity. As a Myanmar researcher who identifies as Kachin-Myanmar and is actively engaged in Myanmar diaspora activism, I am known to some ethnic community leaders within the diaspora. This familiarity facilitated access to key gatekeepers, who referred me to appropriate women and youth leaders within the Karen community. Such relational access was particularly important in establishing trust and enabling

participant recruitment within a community where initial engagement is often cautious and mediated through social networks.

At the same time, I share linguistic, national, and political connections with participants, which may facilitate rapport and enhance sensitivity to their migration histories and sociopolitical contexts. However, I do not belong to the Karen ethnic community, do not speak Karen, and have only limited cultural familiarity beyond academic knowledge. As a result, I am simultaneously positioned as an insider to the broader Myanmar context and an outsider to the Karen community. This dual positioning reflects Narayan's argument that researchers occupy multiple and shifting identities shaped by different social locations, which may alternately bring them closer to or distance them from participants (Narayan 672).

This positionality is further shaped by intersectional factors, including ethnicity, language, migration experience, and political engagement. While shared national identity may enable connection, ethnic and linguistic differences structure boundaries of belonging and influence how participants perceive and engage with the researcher. Participants may therefore position me differently across contexts—at times as a familiar insider and at other times as a cultural outsider—thereby affecting trust, disclosure, and interaction. As Yip notes, positionality shapes not only access to participants but also the nature of the researcher–participant relationship and the data that emerge from it (222–23).

To address these dynamics, this study adopts reflexivity as an ongoing methodological practice. Reflexivity involves critically examining how the researcher's identities, assumptions, and experiences shape the research process and the knowledge produced (Yip 223). Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, this approach acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants. By remaining attentive to these relational dynamics throughout data collection and analysis, I aim to engage ethically with participants' narratives while recognizing the influence of my own positionality.

In this way, positionality is understood not as a limitation but as a constitutive element of qualitative inquiry. Recognizing the fluid, relational, and intersectional nature of insider–outsider positions enables a more nuanced understanding of the research process and strengthens the credibility and transparency of the findings.

5.10 Fieldwork Reflections and Cultural Encounters

The fieldwork process involved a series of culturally grounded encounters that shaped both the research process and my role as a researcher. During my field visits to London, Ontario, I initially intended to stay in a hotel. However, following the advice of the bilingual interview assistant, I learned that an elder Karen couple considered it culturally inappropriate for a guest visiting their community to stay elsewhere. Declining their offer of accommodation could be perceived as disrespectful. As a result, I accepted their invitation to stay in their home, despite it being my first overnight stay with people I had not previously met.

This experience became an important moment of cultural immersion. Observing everyday practices—such as home organization, food preparation, and interactions with neighbours—provided insight into the communal and relational nature of Karen social life. These interactions resembled village-based forms of sociality and deepened my understanding of participants' cultural contexts. Such experiences reflect that qualitative research is not a neutral process of data collection but is shaped by ongoing relationships and interactions between researcher and participants, in which knowledge is co-constructed within specific social contexts (Finlay 210–11).

Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes, based on their preference for comfort and familiarity. One interview was conducted via Zoom due to the participant's availability, and another took place in a public park. Across these settings, participants consistently offered refreshments as a gesture of hospitality. In one instance, a participant prepared a full meal prior to the interview, and I was encouraged to accept it, as refusal could be considered impolite. Similarly, I received a large quantity of home-grown cucumbers as a gift, which I later shared with members of the host household and neighbours. These moments highlight how norms of generosity, reciprocity, and relational care shaped the research encounter. During the fieldwork, I also attended a Karen wedding ceremony held at a church, where many participants wore traditional attire. The church served not only as a religious space but also as a central site of community gathering and cultural expression. This observation further demonstrated how social institutions structure community life and belonging.

Recruitment initially presented challenges, as some participants were hesitant to engage in interviews. However, a community gathering organized during the first field visit created a more informal and relational environment, which helped build trust and familiarity. As a result,

participants became more comfortable and willing to share their experiences. As the interviews progressed, initial nervousness diminished, and participants shared their stories with increasing openness and emotional depth, particularly when discussing mothering and family life.

These experiences illustrate the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research. As Finlay argues, research is inherently shaped by intersubjective relationships, where the researcher's presence, interactions, and positionality influence both data collection and interpretation (211–12). In this study, engaging participants through culturally appropriate practices, shared experiences, and relational trust not only facilitated access but also enriched the depth and meaning of the collected data.

5.11 Data Analysis

This study employs thematic analysis as the primary method for analyzing qualitative interview data. Thematic analysis is understood as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset, enabling both detailed description and deeper interpretation of participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke 6). It allows the researcher to systematically organize data while also examining broader meanings and social processes embedded in participants' narratives.

The selection of thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for this study due to its theoretical flexibility and compatibility with intersectional and feminist research frameworks. Rather than being limited to a single way of understanding knowledge, thematic analysis allows the researcher to examine both participants' lived experiences and the broader social, cultural, and structural contexts that shape those experiences (Braun and Clarke 5). This flexibility aligns with the study's intersectional framework, which seeks to understand how gender, migration status, ethnicity, and generation interact in shaping the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women. The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis.

First, I engaged in data familiarization by repeatedly reading interview transcripts, noting initial observations and patterns. Second, I generated initial codes by systematically identifying meaningful segments of data relevant to the research questions. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to be grounded in participants' narratives rather than imposing a priori. Third, codes were organized into potential themes to capture broader patterns across the dataset. Fourth, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions

between themes. Fifth, themes were defined and named with careful attention to how each theme captured a significant aspect of participants' lived experiences. Finally, the analysis was produced and written, integrating thematic findings with theoretical interpretation and illustrative participant quotes (Braun and Clarke 16–17).

Importantly, this study recognizes that themes do not simply "emerge" from the data but are actively constructed through the researcher's interpretive engagement. As Braun and Clarke emphasize, thematic analysis involves the researcher's active role in identifying patterns, selecting relevant extracts, and producing meaning from the data (8). In this sense, the analysis reflects a reflexive, interpretive process shaped by the researcher's positionality and theoretical framework. In addition, this study is informed by feminist qualitative research methodologies, which emphasize the production of situated knowledge and the importance of participants' lived experiences in shaping analysis. Feminist approaches highlight that knowledge is produced within specific social contexts and shaped by power relations, rather than discovered as objective truth (Saeidzadeh 198–203). As such, the analysis prioritizes participants' voices while critically examining how gendered power relations, migration processes, and structural inequalities shape their experiences.

By integrating thematic analysis with a feminist and intersectional framework, this study moves beyond descriptive categorization to offer a contextualized and relational interpretation of refugee women's settlement experiences. Themes are therefore understood not merely as patterns in the data, but as expressions of broader social structures, cultural meanings, and power relations that shape participants' everyday lives.

5.12 Reliability and Validity

In qualitative research, the concepts of reliability and validity are understood differently from how they are applied in quantitative research. Rather than emphasizing measurement, replication, and generalizability, qualitative research focuses on the credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity of findings (Bryman and Bell 168). As Bryman and Bell argue, applying conventional criteria of reliability and validity to qualitative research can be problematic, as qualitative inquiry seeks to understand meanings, experiences, and social processes rather than to produce standardized or replicable results. To address this, qualitative researchers have developed alternative criteria for evaluating research quality, including *credibility, transferability, dependability***,** and *confirmability*

(Bryman and Bell 169). These criteria provide a more appropriate framework for assessing the rigor of qualitative research.

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings are believable and accurately represent participants' perspectives. In this study, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants during fieldwork, careful interpretation of interview data, and the use of direct quotations to reflect participants' voices. As Bryman and Bell note, credibility is closely linked to how well the researcher captures participants' social reality (169).

Transferability concerns the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, qualitative research provides detailed, contextualized accounts that allow readers to determine whether findings may be applicable to similar settings (Bryman and Bell 169). In this study, rich descriptions of participants' backgrounds, migration histories, and settlement experiences are provided to enable such contextual understanding.

Dependability parallels reliability and refers to the consistency and transparency of the research process. Bryman and Bell suggest that qualitative research should maintain clear documentation of research procedures, including data collection and analysis (169–170). In this study, dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of interview procedures, coding processes, and analytical decisions, thereby making the research process transparent and traceable.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which findings are shaped by participants' narratives rather than by the researcher's bias or subjectivity. As qualitative research acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role, confirmability emphasizes reflexivity and transparency (Bryman and Bell 170). In this study, reflexive practices were employed throughout data collection and analysis, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the data while recognizing the influence of the researcher's positionality.

In addition to these criteria, this study recognizes that qualitative research is inherently interpretive and context-dependent. As Bryman and Bell highlight, the aim is not to produce universally generalizable findings but to generate meaningful, situated understandings of social phenomena (168). By applying these criteria, this study ensures methodological rigour while remaining consistent with the epistemological foundations of qualitative and feminist research.

5.13 Methodological Limitations

While this study provides in-depth and contextually grounded insights into the settlement experiences of intergenerational Karen refugee women in Canada, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the value of the research but rather situate its scope and interpretive boundaries.

First, this study is based on a relatively small, qualitative sample of eleven intergenerational Karen refugee women residing in London, Ontario. Although qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all Karen refugee populations or to other refugee groups in different geographical contexts. Instead, the study offers a detailed, context-specific understanding of participants' lived experiences across generations.

Second, the sampling process relied on a combination of convenience and snowball sampling through community gatekeepers. While this approach facilitated access and trust, it may have shaped the composition of the sample. Participants were primarily recruited through community and church-based networks, which may limit the representation of intergenerational Karen refugee women who are less connected to these social structures or who experience different forms of marginalization.

Third, language and interpretation were important methodological considerations. Although most participants could communicate in English, some relied on interpretation, and others responded only partially in Burmese. The use of interpretation may have influenced how participants' responses were conveyed, potentially shaping nuance, tone, or meaning. In addition, as the researcher does not speak Karen, the analysis relied on translated data, which may limit access to certain linguistic and cultural subtleties in understanding the experiences of intergenerational Karen refugee women.

Fourth, the study is shaped by the researcher's positionality. As a Myanmar researcher who is not part of the Karen ethnic community, I occupied a position that was simultaneously insider and outsider. While this positioning facilitated access through shared national and linguistic connections, it may also have influenced participants' responses and the interpretation of data. Although reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, the findings remain shaped by the researcher's perspectives and analytical framework.

Fifth, the study relies on participants' retrospective accounts of their settlement experiences. Such narratives are shaped by memory, interpretation, and subsequent experiences,

and may not fully capture the immediacy or complexity of earlier stages of resettlement. However, these reflections remain valuable for understanding how intergenerational Karen refugee women make meaning of their experiences over time.

Finally, while this study explicitly focuses on two intergenerational cohorts—women who arrived in adulthood and those who arrived as children or adolescents—it does not capture the full diversity of experiences within the Karen refugee population. The experiences of recently arrived refugees, single women, or those outside family-based settlement contexts remain beyond the scope of this research.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a nuanced and reflexive account of the settlement experiences of intergenerational Karen refugee women. By acknowledging these methodological constraints, the research maintains transparency and strengthens its overall rigour.

CHAPTER SIX
Findings

6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the first part of the empirical findings from interviews with eleven Karen refugee women, organized to highlight intergenerational differences in settlement experiences. It is divided into two main parts. In Part I (Section 6.2), I outline participants' demographic and background profiles. including years of settlement experience in Canada, age, employment information, spousal information, children's information, other questions related to the perception of gender responsibilities in the family, and community connection and services they seek upon arrival in London. By comparing adult-arrival mothers with youth-arrival women who are now mothers, this section provides essential context for understanding how age at migration and life-course position shaped opportunities, barriers, and long-term settlement trajectories.

In Part II (Sections 6.3–6.4), I present thematic findings from semi-structured interviews. Section 6.3 examines gendered settlement roles and refugee motherhood, showing how caregiving responsibilities, household labour, culturally grounded understandings of gender equality, and mothering-related stressors shaped women's experiences across generations. In particular, I examine how participants navigated role reversals, language barriers, fears of cultural loss, and the ways they adapted family strategies within unfamiliar institutional settings. Section 6.4 explores intergenerational dimensions of emotional integration, focusing on cultural transmission and emotional belonging, identity formation and community leadership among younger women, and differing perceptions of successful settlement shaped by coping strategies, faith, and education.

Section 6.5 concludes the chapter by synthesizing these findings, emphasizing how Karen refugee women's settlement experiences were structured by life-course position and gendered caregiving roles, with language access and institutional navigation emerging as central challenges. Together, these findings establish the empirical foundation for the following discussion chapter, which interprets the broader implications of intergenerational settlement experiences among Karen refugee women in Canada.

Part I

6.2 Demographic and Background Profiles of Participants

This section presents Part I, demographic and preliminary findings from eleven Karen refugee women living in London, Ontario. Participants were divided into two groups based on age at arrival and life-course position:

1. **Adult-arrival mothers** (six participants) who migrated to Canada as adult women with spouses and children.
2. **Youth-arrival Karen women** (five participants) who arrived as children or adolescents with their parents and are now mothers.

This comparative structure allows analysis of intergenerational differences in settlement trajectories, gender roles, and access to services—central themes in this dissertation's intersectional framework.

6.2.1 Overview of Participants

Summary of Participants

Group	Participants (Pseudonyms)	Arrival Age	Current Age Range
Adult-arrival mothers	Nu Nu; Gu Ru Ru; Chi Chi; Aye Thein; Nya Nya Say; Ku Lah Paw	Arrived in Canada as adults/ mothers	35–64 years
Youth-arrival women	Sai Rong; Daymu; Wah; Grace; Bee	Arrived in Canada as children or teenagers	25–34 years

Among the eleven Karen refugee women, eight stated they were Christians, and three were Catholics (Catholics and other Christians share many beliefs but differ in their interpretation of the Bible, the role of church tradition, and the sacraments). Religious affiliation remained an important source of community connection and emotional support across both generations. All participants had lived for extended periods in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border prior to resettlement in Canada. Three participants—Nu Nu, Bee, and Sai Rong—were born in refugee camps and spent their entire childhoods there before relocating to London, Ontario. Adult-arrival women had lived in Canada for approximately 5–20 years, while youth-arrival participants had longer residence histories of 11–20 years, often having grown up and completed schooling in

Canada. These different stages of arrival shaped participants' educational opportunities, labour-market participation, and perceptions of settlement success, as explored in the following sections.

6.2.2 Education and Employment Trajectories

Adult-Arrival Mothers

Most adult-arrival participants had limited formal education, often interrupted by displacement and life in refugee camps. Several had only a primary or middle-school education, and one had no schooling at all. Despite these educational constraints, several participants held significant roles within refugee camp communities. Nu Nu worked as an elementary school teacher, Gu Ru Ru served as a social worker supporting elderly community members, and Nya Nya Say taught geography and Karen language for more than fifteen years. These experiences demonstrate the presence of valuable skills and leadership among refugee women prior to migration. However, upon resettlement in Canada, many encountered substantial employment barriers. Several older participants remained unemployed or outside the labour force due to language barriers, limited recognition of credentials, and restricted access to training opportunities.

Youth-Arrival Women

Youth-arrival participants had stronger educational integration. Most completed high school or professional training in Canada and entered occupations such as Early Childhood Educator or Personal Support Worker. For example, Sai Rong completed her education in Canada to become an Early Childhood Educator, while Wah and Bee completed PSW diploma programs. This contrast reflects how age at arrival shaped labour market participation. This contrasts with adult-arrival mothers, demonstrating how age at migration can significantly shape long-term employment trajectories and economic opportunities.

6.2.3. Family Structure and Gender Roles

Adult-arrival mothers typically had larger families, often with three to six children, reflecting earlier marriage and childbirth patterns in refugee camps. Youth-arrival women generally had younger children, often under seven years old, reflecting delayed family formation after completing their education. Across both groups, husbands were commonly described as primary breadwinners, while women remained primarily responsible for childcare and domestic labour.

Adult-arrival women emphasized responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and caregiving. Youth-arrival women described similar patterns but noted greater sharing of parenting responsibilities with spouses. These findings suggest both continuity and gradual transformation in Karen gender norms in Canada, with an increasing emphasis on co-parenting among younger couples.

6.2.4. Cultural Traditions and Changing Gender Norms

Participants described maintaining Karen cultural practices such as family prayer, eating together, and teaching respect for elders. For example, Nu Nu continued to separate men's and women's clothes as a sign of respect within the household. At the same time, migration also reshaped certain traditions. Some participants stopped practices, such as preparing water for their husbands before meals or using physical discipline with their children. Youth-arrival women described negotiating between cultural expectations and gender equality. Sai Rong expressed discomfort with gendered curfew expectations and restrictions on women's outdoor activities. These narratives illustrate intergenerational negotiations over gender norms in the context of resettlement.

6.2.5 Community Connection and Settlement Services

Upon arrival, participants accessed multiple settlement supports, including healthcare, language training, housing, and employment services. Despite this, both groups identified persistent structural barriers, such as language limitations, transportation constraints, childcare responsibilities, inadequate information about services, discrimination, and cultural barriers. Adult-arrival women emphasized difficulties learning English or finding employment due to their age and limited education. Youth-arrival participants described challenges like those experienced by their parents, highlighting the intergenerational effects of settlement barriers.

6.2. 6 Housing and Economic Stability

Most adult-arrival families have achieved homeownership, reflecting long-term settlement trajectories. Youth-arrival families showed mixed outcomes, with both renters and homeowners. Despite relative housing stability, many participants continued to experience financial stress, health concerns, and employment insecurity.

6.2.7 Comparative Insights: Adult vs Youth Arrival

Several patterns emerged:

1. **Education Advantage:** Youth-arrival women completed schooling in Canada and accessed skilled employment more easily.
2. **Language Barriers:** Adult-arrival mothers faced greater challenges learning English and entering the labour market.
3. **Gender Role Negotiation:** Younger women expressed more egalitarian family relationships.
4. **Community Reliance:** Both groups relied heavily on church networks and Karen community ties.

6.2.8 Structural Barriers and Unmet Needs in Refugee Settlement

Across both participant groups, demographic findings show that adjustment to life in Canada is not a short-term transition, but a continuing experience shaped by inequalities in language access, employment opportunities, housing conditions, and social support. Although participants used a range of settlement programs after arrival, they reported ongoing obstacles that limited their ability to fully benefit from these services. Adult-arrival mothers identified major concerns related to English-language learning, job access, mental health, affordable housing, and digital literacy. Many reported persistent difficulties securing stable employment because of limited English proficiency, unrecognized qualifications, age-related constraints, and experiences of discrimination.

Participants in both groups also noted limited access to interpreter services, which made it harder to communicate with institutions and understand available resources. Their accounts indicate that adjustment challenges extended beyond income and employment to include social relationships and emotional well-being. The data further suggest that integration unfolded over many years rather than as a single transition. Adult-arrival mothers often came with work experience gained in refugee camps, yet these skills were seldom acknowledged in the Canadian labour market. As a result, several remained outside formal employment or worked in insecure positions. Youth-arrival women also reported issues such as discrimination and social isolation, and many linked their own experiences to the struggles faced by their parents, reflecting intergenerational effects. Across both groups, participants described recurring difficulties when

seeking assistance, including limited transportation, childcare responsibilities, insufficient information about programs, and difficulties obtaining interpreter support. Together, these patterns provide important context for understanding participants' settlement trajectories and the demographic factors shaping their experiences.

Part II: Semi-structured Interview Findings

6.3 Gendered Settlement Roles and Refugee Motherhood

This section presents interview findings on how Karen refugee women described gendered responsibilities, motherhood, and settlement-related stressors. Across both adult-arrival mothers and youth-arrival women, participants identified caregiving responsibilities as central to their resettlement experiences. Their narratives illustrate how gendered expectations shaped everyday life, family roles, cultural practices, and coping strategies. Five subthemes emerged from the interview data and are discussed below

6.3.1 The Most Challenging Roles in the Settlement Process

When asked, *"Do you have any specific role(s) or responsibilities that gave you the most trouble during the settlement process?"* all women who migrated to Canada with their children gave the same response: being a mother and raising children in a new country caused the most stress and trouble during settlement. Managing children's education, health care, safety, and emotional well-being within unfamiliar social and institutional systems created ongoing pressure. One participant who arrived without children identified language barriers as her main difficulty, explaining that not knowing English and relying on Google to locate essential services, especially medical appointments, was particularly challenging. Interestingly, responses from the five women who arrived as children or adolescents with their parents were similar. These young women described unexpectedly taking on multiple responsibilities for their families—acting as interpreters, decision-makers, caregivers, and sometimes, financial contributors—while simultaneously adjusting to Canadian schools. This sudden role reversal was often the most difficult period for them. These accounts show that the roles participants identified as most challenging in settlement were closely linked to caregiving responsibilities and family adjustment across generations.

6.3.2 Gendered Legacies in Household Roles

All participants described gendered divisions of labour consistent with Karen cultural norms. Older women expressed contentment with traditional roles, interpreting them as meaningful rather than restrictive:

"I am happy that I can stay home to take care of my two daughters… and my dad; I can go to every hospital appointment [with my dad]." (Nu Nu)

Younger participants described similar gendered expectations but showed adaptive strategies—using occupational choices or staggered work shifts to balance paid employment with caregiving:

"We both work but on opposite shifts… he works 5:00 am–1:00 pm, and I do the evening shift. That's how we manage caregiving." (Bee)

"Luckily, I am in a professional field (child care) where I can bring my child to work with me or find a schedule that fits." (Sai Roong)

These narratives indicate that gender roles persisted as a cultural inheritance, while women exercised agency by negotiating practical adjustments within these expectations. Several younger women described an accelerated transition into adulthood as they assumed responsibilities traditionally held by parents:

"Moving to Canada was a significant shift… I became the caregiver and had to look after my family, including my younger siblings." (Daymu)

"I spoke English a little but not fluently… it took three years to become fluent while interpreting for my parents." (Wah)

Older women retained their caregiving identities but faced intensified stress when navigating schools, healthcare systems, and services with limited language skills and resources:

"Mothering in Canada was very hard… other children had the support they needed, but I could not give that to mine… they asked for help with homework, and I didn't know how to help them." (Gu Ru Ru)

Together, these accounts show continuity in gendered responsibilities alongside practical adaptations within families.

6.3.3 Cultural Understandings of Gender Equality

Participants described gender equality as mutual respect, shared decision-making, and cooperation within marriage. Rather than rejecting tradition, many framed equality within Karen cultural values.

"I do enjoy gender equality in my home because my husband and I work together fifty-fifty. We make decisions together and support each other." (Nya Nya Say)

"Gender equality goes beyond a simple fifty-fifty split… there are days when one of us needs more help." (Bee)

Grace, who stopped working after maternity leave when she became a mother of two young children, expressed a different understanding of gender equality:

"Gender equality is important… when someone [the husband] is working, somebody [the wife] takes care of the kids." (Grace)

These accounts illustrate diverse understandings of equality shaped by cultural experience and family needs. Participants generally endorsed gender equality but interpreted it through Karen values of cooperation and mutual respect. Their perspectives reflected not a rejection of tradition but a reinterpretation of cultural practices, sometimes creating tension when Canadian expectations differed from Karen understandings.

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6.3.4 Culturally Rooted Motherhood

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

All the employed mothers in my sample reported prioritizing their children when seeking jobs and choosing shifts. For instance, Sai Roong, who received caregiving help from her parents, considered two alternative options as a primary caregiver:

> I have a child, and I make it my first priority. It can be a challenge to find a job that will fit into my schedule. I am a professional childcare provider, so I chose a job that allowed me to bring my child to work with me or find a schedule that works for me. (Sai Roong)

Another employed woman whose children were already of school age tried to work different shifts to ensure one of the parents was available for morning drop-off and afternoon pick-up at the school.

> My husband and I both work but we work opposite shifts. [When] I go back to work my husband works from 5:00 am to 1:00 pm shift, and then I do the evening shift. This is how we attempt to overcome (for caregiving). (Bee)

Furthermore, these women continued to follow their cultural traditions in Canada, including cooking and eating meals together, regularly participating in family prayer at the church, and performing prayer exchange services at someone's home when necessary. Karen refugee women define the meaning of motherhood by following their cultural traditions and their perception of gender equality (as discussed in the previous section); they choose to stay at home or go to work based on their economic needs and the availability of caregiving help, independent of male control, and they do not feel any oppression or negative emotions associated with motherhood. In other words, the intersecting influences of race, gender, class, and cultural tradition shape their understanding of motherhood.

6.3. 5 Mothering-Related Stressors in Resettlement

When asked about their mothering experiences in Canada, participants identified three main sources of stress: *role reversal, place-related* concerns, and f*ear of losing cultural traditions*. These factors disrupted their mothering practices during the settlement process.

Role Reversal Stressors

Interview findings suggest that role reversal stress emerged from two main factors. First, there was a sudden shift in traditional mother–child roles during resettlement. Children often adapted more quickly to a new language, culture, and social environment than their parents, and therefore assumed responsibilities usually carried out by adults. They became interpreters and primary communicators for their families during medical appointments, school meetings, and interactions

with institutions, creating emotional strain for both children and parents. Second, some women experienced a change in identity, moving from respected educators or community leaders in refugee camps to ESL learners in Canada.

Sai Roong, who was eleven when she arrived in Canada, described the pressure of assuming caregiving responsibilities while still a student:

"My roles in the refugee camp were as a student and a daughter… my parents were the providers. As a child, I learned English faster and adjusted more quickly… I became the caregiver… I even attended my sister's parent-teacher meetings while still in high school."

Grace, who arrived at age fifteen, described stress when acting as interpreter because professional interpreters were unavailable:

"…I have to help my father when going to the hospital, insurance, and banking… I tried to explain it but didn't know all the vocabulary." (Grace)

Gu Ru Ru, who had been a social worker in refugee camps, described frustration when language barriers prevented her from helping her children:

"Mothering in Canada was very hard… my children asked for help with homework, but I couldn't help them… sometimes my kids cried because I didn't know how to help." (Gu Ru Ru)

Place-Related Stressors

Although participants recognized that Canada was a safe and peaceful country, many still felt anxious about their children's safety in an unfamiliar environment. They were unsure which neighbourhoods were safe, what risks to watch for, or how to protect their children in a new social setting. These concerns affected their mental well-being and limited their ability to focus on other aspects of settlement.

Nya Nya Say explained:

"…back home, children can go anywhere and be safe because everyone knows each other, but here they cannot go out on their own, which feels like taking away their freedom." (Nya Nya Say)

Similarly, Gu Ru Ru worried about her children going out at night or becoming involved in drugs. She stopped working to supervise them, which later caused financial stress and depression:

"I have many worries for my kids… not to go out at night or get involved with drugs… when she was young, I stayed home… I feel depressed because I have no income." (Gu Ru Ru)

Fear of Losing Cultural Traditions

Participants also expressed concern that their children might lose Karen cultural traditions in Canada. They worried about language loss, changing values, and new social norms that differed from their upbringing. Chi Chi explained:

"When my son said a bad word to me, I felt heartbroken… I worry about his friends." (Chi Chi)

She added:

"We try to keep our culture… we do not encourage children to live together before marriage because it is a big deal in our culture." (Chi Chi)

Daymu compared discipline practices:

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

Nu Nu expressed concern about new ideas children learned at school:

"My daughter said she learned from friends that dating between girls is okay… schools teach not to discriminate, but maybe children misunderstand." (Nu Nu)

Aye Than described anxiety about discipline:

"In Canada, I am afraid to discipline my children because they know their rights… they have too much freedom." (Aye Than)

These narratives show how fears of cultural loss created emotional strain for mothers as they tried to balance cultural continuity with their children's adaptation to Canadian society.

Notably, none of the participants explicitly emphasized economic hardship as a primary source of parenting stress; instead, they more frequently described how language barriers disrupted their parenting practices and daily family interactions. For example, mothers explained that limited English affected routine situations such as helping children with homework, communicating with teachers, speaking with doctors during medical visits, understanding school notices, and talking with their children about school or friendship problems at home. Several women—particularly those who arrived in Canada as adult mothers—also happily shared how they and their spouses found their first jobs through friends' networks, such as cleaning or farm work, even though these jobs offered low pay and little financial security. By contrast, among the five participants who arrived in Canada during their teenage years, all their spouses were employed in full-time positions. This could be why all my participants identified their spouses as family breadwinners.

These findings show that Karen refugee women's settlement experiences were shaped by gendered caregiving responsibilities that continued across migration while adapting to new institutional contexts in Canada. Across generations, motherhood remained central to women's identities, and its meaning was negotiated through cultural traditions, perceptions of gender equality, and practical family strategies such as shared caregiving and flexible employment choices. Many participants described their parenting practices as part of a continuing cultural legacy, linking everyday caregiving, spiritual values, and respect for elders to their understanding of family responsibility. At the same time, language barriers, role reversals, fears of cultural loss, and place-related anxieties created significant emotional strain, especially when navigating schools, healthcare systems, and unfamiliar social norms. Settlement challenges, therefore, appeared less as economic hardship alone and more as gendered and intergenerational pressures embedded in caregiving roles and cultural expectations.

6.4 Intergenerational Dimensions of Emotional Integration

This section shows that emotional integration among Karen refugee women is shaped by intergenerational relationships, cultural transmission, and everyday coping practices, rather than solely by economic outcomes. Across both groups, participants emphasized the importance of faith, community networks, and adaptive coping strategies in redefining what "successful settlement" meant to them. Three subthemes emerged from the interview findings and are discussed below:

6.4.1 Cultural Transmission and Emotional Belonging

All participants emphasized the importance of transmitting Karen cultural values, although this responsibility held different meanings for older and younger women, particularly those raising Canadian-born children. Older women viewed cultural teaching as part of their everyday caregiving role and emphasized practices such as language use, food traditions, modest dress, respect for elders, and moral instruction. As Nu Nu explained:

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

Similarly, Nya Nya Say highlighted kindness and hospitality as central Karen values:

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

For younger women, especially those who became mothers in Canada, cultural transmission was a deliberate and conscious effort to preserve identity while fostering a sense of belonging in a multicultural society. They viewed themselves as cultural mediators, teaching their children Karen history, language, and values such as respect, hard work, and community solidarity. Many described mediating between Karen and Canadian contexts through everyday practices, church activities, and Karen language schools. In this way, cultural transmission became a source of empowerment and agency in their roles as mothers and community members. Wah noted:

"I teach my kids to respect elders and remember where they come from. We go to Karen school every week." (Wah)

Bee similarly emphasized teaching heritage alongside adaptation:

"My kids were born here, but that doesn't mean they don't need to know their roots. I teach them language, culture, and where mommy came from." (Bee)

Sai Roong described combining both cultural contexts in parenting:

"We mix both—Karen values and Canadian life. I want them to have both." (Sai Roong)

Younger mothers often described cultural teaching as intentional identity work that helped children feel connected to family and community as they navigated Canadian society. Bee reflected on this process:

"I don't worry about me but my children… I hope they learn our Karen culture and understand where mommy came from… Because our kids were born here, they easily catch up with Canadian culture… I hope to teach them my language and our culture and people." (Bee)

Across generations, cultural transmission functioned as an important source of emotional belonging. Older women emphasized continuity in caregiving practices, while younger mothers consciously balanced Karen and Canadian influences in raising their children. These everyday practices—teaching language, attending church, participating in community schools, and modelling respect—helped families maintain connection, stability, and a shared sense of identity within their resettlement experience.

6.4.2 Intergenerational Identity Formation and Leadership

Another sub-theme that emerged across interviews with Karen refugee women is the close relationship between identity formation, community participation, and leadership, particularly among the younger generation. For younger participants, identity development was closely tied to their sense of belonging in Canadian society, with active engagement in community spaces serving both as a coping strategy and as a pathway to empowerment. Their narratives show that identity formation is not only a personal process but also a social one, shaped by age, gender, and migration experience. For instance, Sai Roong recalled how she and her family, despite initially struggling with limited English, built a sense of home through participation in local programs:

"We attended as many programs as we could—homework clubs, art and crafts, women's programs... Eventually, we started to feel at home in Canada." (Sai Roong)

Bee expressed a similar sentiment, emphasizing the importance of collective support:

"It's beneficial to have a community where you belong, feel safe, and know that others will support you." (Bee)

These early experiences with community support often served as a foundation for younger women's later leadership roles. Participants such as Wah and Sai Roong described organizing youth sports and fundraising events, teaching Karen language classes, and assisting newcomers through interpretation and cultural care. At the same time, younger women frequently carried disproportionate responsibilities as cultural brokers and caregivers, acting as interpreters and advocates for older family members. This intergenerational mediation also revealed gaps in settlement support, particularly for elders. Wah and Bee noted that ESL programs often group learners without regard to age, making learning more difficult for older refugees. Sai Roong described how her grandparents, who had never attended school, were required to attend ESL classes without appropriate support:

"They were depressed and disappointed… They cannot find any recreational programs in their language, so they get very homesick." (Sai Roong)

Despite these challenges, older women continued to maintain maternal and cultural responsibilities within the family, while younger women more often assumed visible community leadership roles. Both generations valued gender equality and cultural preservation, but they negotiated these ideals differently, depending on their life stage and social position. Younger

women, who grew up or came of age in Canada, had greater opportunities to lead publicly and articulate community goals, while older women sustained cultural continuity within family life.
As younger participants matured, many became community leaders—teaching Karen language, organizing youth programs, fundraising, and supporting newcomers through interpretation and cultural guidance. Their leadership grew from both personal commitment and intergenerational responsibility. These experiences show how community participation supported identity formation and belonging while also highlighting structural gaps in settlement services, especially for older refugees.

6.4.3. Coping, Resilience, and Perceptions of Successful Settlement

The findings reveal distinct intergenerational differences in how Karen refugee women conceptualize and experience "successful settlement" in Canada. These differences are shaped by intersecting identities of age, gender, ethnicity, class, religious orientation, and migration histories. While both older and younger participants demonstrate resilience, the strategies they employ—and the benchmarks by which they evaluate success—are influenced by their positionalities within family, community, and institutional contexts.

Younger participants employed three primary coping strategies to manage the challenges of resettlement: (1) maintaining optimism and a future-oriented outlook; (2) drawing strength from faith-based resources; and (3) pursuing education aligned with personal interests and employability. First, younger women consistently expressed gratitude for the opportunities in Canada that had been denied to them in refugee camps. This optimism served as a powerful coping mechanism and shaped their understandings of successful settlement. As Grace explained:
"I would consider our family to have a successful settlement because we are still doing well... and we are not homeless." (Grace)
This notion of stability as success was echoed by Wah, who described success in terms of security and basic material sufficiency:
"I feel successful when I feel no trouble and no worry. I feel successful five years after arriving in Canada. My dream was not to be homeless, to have a job, a car… I achieve more than my dream." (Wah)
Others, like Sai Roong, described success in more affective and identity-based terms:

“To me, ‘successful settlement’ is feeling at home. I think I did it because I feel that this is my home... it is safe to say this will be my forever home, and Canada is my safe zone.” (Sai Roong)

Not all participants perceived their journey as complete. Daymu linked success to still-unmet personal goals:

“My settlement is not yet successful. I am not a Canadian citizen yet, don’t have enough education yet. To me ‘successful settlement’ is a person with education, a house and money.” (Daymu)

Second, religious belief was central to emotional coping for younger women. It offered a spiritual framework for interpreting hardship and provided access to supportive communities. Wah recounted:

“My faith in Jesus—that’s how I go through my challenges. I changed all the challenges to opportunities… I believe God wanted me to be here in Canada for a reason.” (Wah)

Similarly, Grace noted:

“We are Christians, so most of the time when we face challenges, we pray to God, read the Bible. There are people in the community who help us pray. That gives us strength and less stress.” (Grace)

Faith was not only a source of comfort but also a mode of agency and identity continuity. Sai Roong described her religious practice as something she would pass on to the next generation:

“Faith has been a huge part of my life. That’s how I was raised, and that is something I will teach my children too.” (Sai Roong)

Third, education played a pivotal role in shaping young women’s post-migration trajectories. Participants selected fields of study that aligned with their personal interests and job-market demands, facilitating economic independence and reshaping gendered expectations. Sai Roong reflected:

“I feel like I didn’t choose ECE for my career but instead, it chose me… I was the breadwinner for my parents… Now that I am an ECE, I am confident that this is where I want to be… I give importance to the future of our generation.” (Sai Roong)

Grace emphasized how her choice of business accounting ensured continuous employment:

“After high school, I took business accounting. After I graduated, I worked shortly at an accounting firm… I was constantly working.” (Grace)

For Wah and Bee, becoming personal support workers was both a strategic and moral choice:

“I like to care about other people, especially the elderly. I am a kind person, so I just want to give good care to people.” (Wah)

“I chose [PSW] just to get a job easily, but now I realize that I do like helping seniors.” (Bee)

These narratives reveal that younger Karen women perceive successful settlement not only as economic and civic inclusion but also as the capacity to exercise autonomy and contribute meaningfully to Canadian society.

In contrast, older Karen women primarily defined successful settlement in relational and collective terms, often centering their children’s progress as the measure of success. Many older women minimized their own achievements and instead focused on their children’s futures. For example:

“For my children, I would say ‘yes’ they have achieved it, but for myself ‘no’… I still struggle with language.” (Nya Nya Say)

“My children have just started building their life… so they have not achieved it yet.” (Aye Than)

“None of my children have completed post-secondary school yet… I am expecting all the children to go to Graduate School.” (Gu Ru Ru)

Some older participants reported modest success but saw it as incomplete, while others identified structural access—such as Canadian citizenship or public services—as important settlement milestones:

“I think my successful settlement is halfway… because I can still go higher and higher.” (Chi Chi)

“I am a Canadian citizen so that’s how I feel is successfully in settlement.” (Nu Nu)

Overall, younger women tended to emphasize personal empowerment, emotional belonging, and economic participation, whereas older women focused on family progress, intergenerational sacrifice, and structural security. These differing perspectives show that settlement is not a singular or static experience, but a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by intersecting social locations.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the demographic profiles and interview findings from eleven Karen refugee women, organized comparatively between adult-arrival mothers and youth-arrival women who are now mothers. The demographic overview demonstrated clear intergenerational differences in education and employment trajectories, shaped largely by age at arrival and

opportunities to complete schooling in Canada. Adult-arrival mothers often experienced disrupted education due to displacement but brought meaningful skills and leadership from refugee camp settings that were rarely recognized after resettlement. Youth-arrival women generally accessed stronger educational pathways and entered more stable occupations such as Early Childhood Education and Personal Support Work. Across both groups, family life remained structured around gendered divisions of labour, with husbands commonly identified as primary breadwinners and women carrying the daily responsibilities of childcare and domestic work, while younger couples described somewhat greater co-parenting.

The semi-structured interview findings further showed that settlement challenges were deeply connected to gendered caregiving responsibilities. Participants identified motherhood and family adjustment as the most demanding aspects of settlement, including role reversal for youth-arrival women who assumed interpreting and institutional navigation duties at young ages. Gendered household roles persisted across generations, though women described practical adaptations through staggered shifts, occupational choices, and shared caregiving arrangements. Participants also articulated culturally grounded understandings of gender equality, framing it in terms of cooperation, mutual respect, and shared decision-making rather than as a complete rejection of tradition. In defining Karen motherhood, women emphasized culturally shaped caregiving practices and prioritized children when making employment decisions, especially when childcare support was limited.

Across the chapter, one consistent pattern was that parenting stress was described less in terms of economic hardship and more in terms of navigating institutions and daily interactions through limited English. Women repeatedly highlighted how language barriers affected routine parenting tasks, including communicating with teachers, supporting children's education, and accessing healthcare. These pressures were intensified by place-related anxieties about children's safety and by concerns over cultural change, including language loss and shifting norms around discipline, dating, and children's rights. Finally, the chapter showed that emotional integration was negotiated intergenerationally through cultural transmission, community participation, and coping practices. Younger women often described belonging through program participation and later assumed visible leadership roles, while older women maintained family cohesion and cultural responsibilities within the household. Differences also emerged in perceptions of "successful settlement," with younger women emphasizing emotional security, faith, and education, and older

women measuring success through their children's progress and access to structural stability such as citizenship and services.

Overall, this chapter establishes that Karen refugee women's settlement experiences are shaped by life-course position and gendered caregiving responsibilities, with language access and institutional navigation functioning as central dimensions of stress and adaptation. These findings provide the empirical foundation for the following chapter's discussion, which examines how intergenerational patterns reveal broader dynamics of gender, caregiving, belonging, and resilience in refugee women's settlement trajectories, drawing on a feminist methodological approach grounded in intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, Collins, Hynie) and matricentric feminism (O'Reilly).

CHAPTER SEVEN
Discussion

7.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I analyze the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, by bringing my empirical findings into dialogue with intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins's matrix of domination, matricentric feminism, and Michaela Hynie's relational framework of integration. Moving beyond description, I examine how integration is shaped by intergenerational location, gendered responsibilities, migration histories, and structural inequalities. I argue that integration is not a linear or uniform process, but a differentiated and relational one that unfolds through everyday practices of care, cultural continuity, and institutional navigation.

I begin in Section 7.2 by examining intergenerational integration pathways, showing how age at arrival structures divergent settlement trajectories. Women who arrived in adulthood faced constraints linked to interrupted education, caregiving responsibilities, and limited language access, while those who arrived as children or adolescents accessed schooling in Canada and entered the labour market through more structured pathways. In Section 7.3, I interpret these patterns through intersectionality and the matrix of domination, demonstrating how gender, migration status, and institutional barriers intersect to shape the most challenging aspects of settlement, particularly in relation to caregiving and mothering.

Section 7.4 conceptualizes refugee mothering practices as forms of intersectional resistance. I show that caregiving, cultural transmission, and family coordination are not only responsibilities but also adaptive strategies that sustain family well-being and cultural continuity under conditions of displacement. I then extend this analysis in Section 7.5 by focusing on youth agency and gendered resilience. Here, I argue that young Karen women are indispensable yet underrecognized actors in the integration process, whose roles as interpreters, caregivers, and community leaders sustain both family and community integration.

In Section 7.6, I decentre integration by critically re-examining dominant definitions of "successful settlement." Drawing on Hynie's framework and my findings, I show that gender equality, settlement success, and belonging are constructed through relational, cultural, and intergenerational dynamics rather than through standardized policy indicators. By foregrounding

refugee epistemologies, I position Karen refugee women as knowledge producers whose experiences challenge conventional models of integration.

Finally, in Section 8, I synthesize the chapter's key arguments and contributions. I reflect on how the findings advance theoretical understandings of refugee integration, gendered agency, and intergenerational dynamics, and I highlight the broader implications for migration scholarship and policy. Together, this chapter demonstrates that integration is best understood not as individual adaptation to predefined norms, but as an ongoing, uneven negotiation of care, recognition, and belonging, shaped by structural conditions and lived experience.

7.2 Intergenerational Integration Pathways

Findings from Part I show that refugee integration among Karen women in London, Ontario, followed distinct intergenerational pathways shaped by age at arrival, access to education, caregiving responsibilities, and structural barriers. Participants were grouped into women who arrived in adulthood with spouses and children and women who arrived as children or adolescents with their parents, and this life-course distinction proved central to their settlement trajectories. Women who arrived in adulthood often had interrupted schooling from years in refugee camps along the Thai–Myanmar border and assumed significant caregiving responsibilities upon arrival, which limited opportunities for English acquisition and labour-market participation. Women who arrived as children or adolescents completed schooling in Canada and entered occupations such as Early Childhood Education or Personal Support Work, demonstrating that access to education shaped long-term economic outcomes. These patterns are consistent with Hynie's argument that integration pathways vary according to age at arrival, migration history, and community context, thereby shaping the opportunities available to different refugee groups (Hynie 326–27).

Intergenerational differences also appeared in family roles and cultural practices. Women who arrived in adulthood often described traditional divisions of labour in which husbands were primary earners, and wives managed childcare and domestic work, reflecting gender norms formed in refugee camp settings. Women who arrived younger reported greater sharing of parenting responsibilities and delayed family formation after completing education, while continuing to sustain Karen practices such as family prayer, respect for elders, and participation in church networks. Settlement, therefore, involved both continuity and adaptation in gender norms and cultural identity across generations.

At the same time, both groups faced ongoing structural constraints. Despite receiving healthcare, language training, housing, and employment services, participants reported persistent barriers, including language limitations, transportation difficulties, childcare demands, discrimination, limited access to interpreters, and insufficient information about programs. Even women educated in Canada described emotional strain and disadvantage linked to their parents' struggles, indicating intergenerational effects of displacement. These patterns reflect Collins's concept of the matrix of domination, in which institutional structures, social narratives, and everyday interactions intersect to shape opportunities (Collins 295–307), and Crenshaw's critique that single-axis approaches overlook how gender, migration history, and socio-economic position combine to produce unequal settlement experiences (Crenshaw 1242–44).

7.3 Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding how Karen refugee women's settlement experiences are shaped by multiple and overlapping systems of power. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emphasizes that individuals experience intersecting forms of oppression across social categories such as race, gender, class, and legal status, and that these experiences cannot be adequately explained by single-axis analyses (Crenshaw 1242). As Crenshaw notes, identity politics often overlooks internal differences within marginalized groups, obscuring the complex realities faced by women whose lives are structured by multiple social inequalities (Crenshaw 1242–44).

Building on this insight, Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes the matrix of domination as a framework that explains how interlocking systems of power operate simultaneously across social structures. Within this matrix, power is organized through four interconnected domains: *the structural domain*, which includes large-scale institutions such as education, labour markets, and legal systems; the *disciplinary domain*, which regulates behaviour through bureaucratic rules and institutional practices; the *hegemonic domain*, which shapes cultural meanings and social norms; and the *interpersonal domain*, which governs everyday social interactions (Collins 295–307). These domains work together to shape both opportunities and constraints for marginalized populations. Collins further emphasizes that oppression is not only structural but also lived and embodied, noting that it is "not simply understood in the mind—it is felt in the body in myriad ways" (Collins 293).

In the context of forced migration, this framework helps illuminate how refugee women's settlement experiences are shaped by intersecting forces of gender, migration status, racialization, and caregiving responsibilities. For Karen refugee women in Canada, these intersecting dynamics become visible through their interactions with settlement institutions, family roles, and cultural expectations. My findings demonstrate that the most difficult aspects of settlement were closely tied to caregiving responsibilities, institutional navigation, and the emotional demands of mothering within unfamiliar social systems. These experiences reveal how structural and interpersonal pressures converge in the everyday lives of refugee mothers.

7.3.1 The Most Challenging Roles in Settlement

My participants identified the most challenging roles during settlement as closely tied to their responsibilities as mothers and caregivers. For adult-arrival women (six participants), raising children in an unfamiliar social and institutional environment was highly stressful. Managing children's education, healthcare, and safety required navigating systems that were often linguistically and culturally unfamiliar. From an intersectional perspective, these experiences illustrate how gendered caregiving roles intersect with migration status and language barriers to produce specific settlement challenges for refugee women.

Within Collins's matrix of domination, these challenges can be understood through the interplay among the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of power. The structural domain is evident in the institutional barriers that participants encountered when interacting with schools, healthcare systems, and other public services. Limited English proficiency often made these systems difficult to navigate, creating additional pressure for mothers responsible for supporting their children's educational and emotional needs. One participant who migrated without children described language barriers as the most difficult aspect of settlement, noting that she relied on online translation tools to locate essential services and schedule medical appointments.

For younger (five) participants who arrived as children or adolescents, the most difficult roles often emerged through a sudden reversal of family responsibilities. Because many children adapted more quickly to English and Canadian institutions, they frequently became interpreters and decision-makers for their families. This shift illustrates how the disciplinary domain of power operates within institutional contexts such as schools and hospitals, where language proficiency becomes necessary for accessing services. As Sai Roong explained, after arriving in Canada at age

eleven, she gradually assumed responsibilities that had previously belonged to her parents: “I learned English faster… I became the caregiver… I even attended my sister’s parent-teacher meetings while still in high school.”

These experiences also highlight the interpersonal domain of the matrix of domination, where power relations are negotiated within family life. Role reversal between parents and children altered traditional family dynamics and created emotional pressure for both generations. Younger participants described balancing school responsibilities with interpreting, caregiving, and supporting their families’ settlement needs. Through an intersectional lens, these experiences demonstrate how age, migration history, and gender intersect to shape the distribution of responsibilities within refugee families. Settlement challenges were therefore not simply individual difficulties, but the result of intersecting structural and relational pressures embedded within caregiving roles.

7.3.2 Mothering-Related Stressors

Participants also described several stressors that shaped their experiences of mothering during resettlement. Three themes were particularly prominent: role reversal within families, concerns about children’s safety in unfamiliar environments, and fears of losing cultural traditions. These stressors illustrate how the matrix of domination operates simultaneously across institutional structures, cultural norms, and everyday family relationships.

Role reversal emerged as one of the most significant stressors. As children adapted more quickly to English and Canadian social institutions, many assumed responsibilities such as interpreting during medical visits, communicating with teachers, and assisting with administrative tasks. For example, Grace described the pressure of interpreting for her father when they visited hospitals or banks, explaining that she often struggled to translate specialized medical terminology. Similarly, Gu Ru Ru, who had previously worked as a social worker in refugee camps, described the emotional difficulty of helping her children navigate schoolwork when she herself faced language barriers: “Mothering in Canada was very hard… my children asked for help with homework, but I couldn’t help them.” These experiences illustrate Collins’s argument that oppression is embodied in everyday life (Collins 293). The emotional stress associated with language barriers, shifting family roles, and institutional navigation was felt not only as a structural constraint but also as a deeply personal and relational experience within families.

Place-related concerns also contributed to mothering stress. Although participants recognized Canada as a safe country, many felt uncertain about how to protect their children in unfamiliar environments. Mothers worried about neighbourhood safety, peer influences, and potential risks such as drug use. Nya Nya Say contrasted Canadian urban environments with the collective familiarity of village life, explaining that in Myanmar, "children can go anywhere and be safe because everyone knows each other." In Canada, by contrast, parents often felt uncertain about their surroundings and the social contexts their children were entering.

Another important stressor involves concerns about cultural continuity. Many mothers expressed anxiety that their children might lose Karen cultural values or adopt behaviours that conflicted with traditional expectations. Chi Chi described feeling heartbroken when her son used disrespectful language, while Daymu noted that disciplinary expectations in Canada differed from those in refugee camps, where children were taught to show strict respect toward parents. These concerns illustrate how the hegemonic domain of the matrix of domination operates through cultural norms, consciousness and social values that shape how individuals interpret behaviour and belonging (Collins 302).

Notably, participants rarely emphasized economic hardship as the primary source of parenting stress. Instead, they focused on the emotional and relational challenges created by language barriers, navigating institutions, and intergenerational cultural differences. These findings suggest that settlement difficulties were experienced less as economic deprivation alone and more as gender pressures embedded in caregiving roles and family responsibilities. Through an intersectional lens, Karen refugee women's mothering experiences reveal how structural constraints, institutional expectations, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships interact to shape the emotional realities of resettlement.

7.4 Refugee Mothering Practices as Intersectional Resistance

The findings suggest that Karen refugee women's mothering practices operate not only as caregiving responsibilities but also as adaptive strategies that sustain family well-being and cultural continuity during resettlement. While refugee women encounter structural challenges such as language barriers, institutional navigation, and shifting family roles, maternal practices become an important site through which women negotiate these pressures. As discussed in Chapter 3, the literature review demonstrates that cultural legacies carried across displacement significantly

shape how refugee women interpret family responsibilities and coping strategies during settlement. These legacies influence gendered expectations surrounding caregiving while simultaneously providing cultural resources that support resilience and continuity within refugee families. In contexts of forced migration, these responsibilities are intensified by gendered expectations: caregiving becomes both a primary source of burden and a key resource for resilience and community continuity (Clark 246–47; Marchbank et al. 27–28). O'Reilly's concept of matricentric feminism highlights how maternal labour functions simultaneously as a site of oppression and resistance, where women negotiate structural constraints while exercising agency through the lived realities of everyday mothering practices (O'Reilly 2, 5). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of motherhood as survival-oriented labour emphasizes that motherhood has served as a crucial site of resistance through communal caregiving and the sustaining of collective survival strategies (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 192). These theoretical perspectives suggest that refugee mothers' everyday caregiving—such as cultural transmission, family coordination, and emotional support—can serve as forms of intersectional resistance, enabling families to navigate displacement and resettlement while preserving cultural continuity.

7.4.1 Gendered Legacies in Household Roles

The findings demonstrate that gendered divisions of labour remain central to family organization among Karen refugee women, reflecting the enduring influence of cultural legacies carried across displacement and resettlement. Participants consistently described caregiving and household responsibilities as culturally embedded expectations associated with women's roles as mothers and wives. However, these roles were neither static nor uniformly experienced; rather, they were renegotiated within the social and institutional context of settlement in Canada. Cultural legacy, in the context of Karen refugee women, is understood as the intergenerational transmission of meanings, practices, and role expectations (UNESCO, *Intangible* 4–5) that shape how these women interpret both family responsibilities and coping strategies during resettlement.

My participants' narratives illustrate how these cultural expectations influence everyday family life. Older women frequently described caregiving roles as meaningful rather than restrictive. For example, Nu Nu explained that she felt satisfied remaining at home to care for her daughters and elderly father, noting that accompanying her father to medical appointments and supporting her children were important aspects of her responsibilities as a mother. Such accounts

highlight how caregiving responsibilities are embedded within cultural understandings of familial duty and maternal commitment. In this regard, caregiving becomes both a source of burden and a key resource for resilience within Karen refugee families, which is consistent with the findings of other researchers, particularly for women whose responsibilities expand during displacement and resettlement (Clark 246–47; Marchbank et al. 27–28).

At the same time, younger participants who became mothers in Canada demonstrated how gendered expectations were renegotiated within the Canadian context. Several women described practical strategies for balancing employment with caregiving responsibilities. Bee, for instance, explained that she and her husband coordinated opposite work shifts to ensure that childcare responsibilities were shared. Sai Roong described choosing a childcare profession that allowed her to bring her child to work and maintain flexibility around parenting. Her strategies illustrate how gendered household roles persist as cultural inheritances while being reshaped through everyday negotiation. These findings support migration scholars' observations that refugee families frequently renegotiate responsibilities as they adapt to new sociocultural environments, with both adults and children assuming expanded roles in caregiving and family survival (Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya 278–80).

The findings also reveal that migration can accelerate changes in family responsibilities, particularly for younger women who arrived in Canada as children or adolescents. Participants such as Daymu and Wah described taking on caregiving roles and serving as interpreters for their families as they acquired English-language skills and became familiar with Canadian institutions more quickly than their parents. These experiences illustrate how cultural expectations intersect with migration histories to reshape intergenerational family dynamics. Adult-arrival mothers, by contrast, often faced intensified challenges when navigating settlement institutions due to limited language proficiency. Gu Ru Ru described the frustration of supporting her children's education while facing language barriers herself, explaining that she struggled to help with homework despite wanting to provide the same support that other parents offered their children. These experiences reflect broader structural barriers within settlement systems, including limited access to interpreters and institutional support for refugee parents. Within these conditions, caregiving responsibilities become both an emotional burden and a critical mechanism through which mothers attempt to maintain family stability.

Taken together, my findings demonstrate that gendered household roles among Karen refugee women are shaped by both cultural continuity and adaptive negotiation. Cultural legacies continue to shape expectations surrounding motherhood and caregiving, yet these roles are continually reconfigured through everyday strategies that help families navigate new institutional environments. Rather than representing fixed traditions, gendered roles emerge as dynamic practices through which refugee mothers sustain family cohesion while responding to the shifting demands of resettlement.

The persistence of gendered household roles underscores how cultural legacies of caregiving endure in resettlement. Yet participants did not view these roles as strictly oppressive; instead, they interpreted caregiving as a meaningful responsibility. Collins's interpersonal and hegemonic domains of the matrix of domination are instructive here: gendered divisions of labour are normalized through cultural expectations but are also reshaped through everyday negotiations, such as alternating work shifts or selecting childcare-related employment. These findings echo O'Reilly's argument that motherhood, though culturally constructed, is also a site of negotiation and agency rather than the passive reproduction of patriarchy (*Matricentric Feminism* 15–16).

7.4.2 Culturally Rooted Motherhood

Beyond household responsibilities, the findings reveal that motherhood among Karen refugee women is deeply shaped by cultural traditions, moral values, and spiritual practices that guide everyday parenting. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of transmitting Karen cultural norms and community values to their children. These practices—including preparing traditional meals, participating in family prayer, teaching respect for elders, and maintaining Karen language and customs—represent what UNESCO defines as intangible cultural heritage: practices and knowledge transmitted across generations that provide communities with a sense of identity and continuity (UNESCO, *Intangible* 4–5).

O'Reilly's distinction between motherhood and mothering provides an important framework for understanding these dynamics. While motherhood refers to a patriarchal institution that is deeply oppressive to women, mothering describes the lived practices through which women nurture their families in ways that are woman-centred and potentially empowering (O'Reilly, "Feminist Mothering" 185). O'Reilly further argues that motherhood is not merely a biological function but a cultural practice that is continuously reshaped by changing social and economic

conditions, whose meanings vary across time and place ("Matricentric Feminism" 16). For Karen refugee women, these maternal practices are renegotiated within unfamiliar institutional contexts where cultural expectations, economic pressures, and migration experiences intersect.

The experiences of Karen refugee mothers illustrate how culturally rooted motherhood practices are carried across displacement while being adapted to the realities of life in Canada. Several participants described motherhood as a culturally meaningful role grounded in traditions from Myanmar and the refugee camps in Thailand. Grace explained that she chose to remain at home with her children while her husband worked, reflecting a cultural understanding of maternal responsibility that prioritized caregiving within the family. Other participants described making employment decisions that accommodated their caregiving roles. Sai Roong explained that she selected a childcare profession that allowed her to bring her child to work, while Bee coordinated work schedules with her husband to ensure that one parent was always available for school drop-off and pick-up.

Participants' narratives also demonstrate how culturally rooted motherhood practices are adapted to the realities of raising children in a multicultural Canadian society. Many mothers described consciously balancing Karen traditions with Canadian social norms as they raised their children. These strategies illustrate how cultural legacy is not a fixed inheritance, but a dynamic process continually reshaped through migration and intergenerational exchange (UNESCO, *Conventions* 3–5). Mothers, therefore, play a crucial role in mediating between cultural continuity and adaptation, ensuring that children remain connected to their cultural heritage while developing the skills needed to navigate Canadian society.

In this sense, culturally rooted motherhood among Karen refugee women functions as both a source of continuity and a strategy of resilience. Maternal practices become an important mechanism through which families navigate the emotional and social challenges of displacement while preserving cultural identity. By maintaining traditions, transmitting cultural knowledge, and supporting children's development, Karen refugee mothers transform everyday caregiving into a relational practice that sustains family cohesion and community belonging across migration.

Taken together, these culturally rooted mothering practices illustrate how Karen refugee mothers sustain family stability and cultural continuity during resettlement. At the same time, these practices reveal how mothers actively negotiate structural constraints and family responsibilities, demonstrating forms of agency embedded in everyday caregiving. The following section therefore

discusses how Karen refugee mothers translate these culturally grounded practices into practical strategies to navigate settlement challenges.

7.4.3 Karen Refugee Mothers' Agency in Action

The concept of agency has been central to feminist and postcolonial scholarship seeking to understand how marginalized individuals—including women, migrants, and racialized minorities—actively navigate structures of oppression (Kanal and Rottmann 2). As discussed in the literature review, scholars such as Mahmood and Butler challenge Western assumptions that equate agency solely with autonomy or overt resistance, emphasizing instead that agency can be relational, culturally embedded, and enacted within existing social norms. Intersectionality further highlights how multiple dimensions of identity—including gender, race, class, ethnicity, and migration status—interact to shape individuals' experiences of both constraint and possibility. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes that individuals located within intersecting systems of power must continually negotiate these layered inequalities while developing strategies to sustain themselves and their communities. In this sense, agency does not emerge outside conditions of domination but is exercised within them.

The experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, illustrate how agency operates through everyday practices of caregiving, adaptation, and family support during resettlement. Despite significant challenges—including language barriers, unfamiliar institutions, and limited economic opportunities—participants demonstrated agency in their daily lives by making strategic decisions that prioritized the well-being of their children and families. Their agency was often expressed through maternal responsibilities such as supporting children's education, navigating social services, preserving cultural traditions, and building social networks within the Karen community. These forms of action closely resemble what Kanal and Rottmann describe as "everyday agency," in which refugee women sustain family life through relational and pragmatic practices rather than overt acts of resistance (2–3).

My findings indicate that participants assumed primary responsibility for children's education, family well-being, accessing settlement services, cultural transmission, and community relationship-building during resettlement. Although language barriers and unfamiliarity with Canadian schools initially constrained their ability to support their children, the women attended English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, sought assistance from settlement agencies, and

relied on community networks to navigate institutions. These efforts demonstrate how refugee mothers actively negotiated structural constraints while sustaining family stability. Such patterns align with Collins's argument that care work operates simultaneously within structures of domination and as a site of agency. Participants' commitment to learning English and mobilizing available resources illustrates strategic action within unequal institutional contexts.

Collins explains that marginalized individuals often occupy "outsider-within" positions that generate distinctive forms of knowledge about social inequality (14). This positionality can "foster new angles of vision on oppression" (27) and enable individuals to develop strategies for navigating dominant institutions. Karen refugee mothers' experiences reflect this dynamic. Although language barriers and institutional unfamiliarity positioned them as partial outsiders within Canadian society, their efforts to learn English, advocate for their children in schools, and navigate social services illustrate how they transformed this marginal position into a site of practical agency. For example, children who had previously studied in refugee camps often transitioned into Canadian schools within a year, and seven participants conducted interviews in English, reflecting the women's sustained investment in ESL education to better support their families.

Women-centred caregiving networks also played a crucial role in sustaining resilience during resettlement. Some participants reported receiving support primarily from daughters rather than sons in tasks such as translation and school communication during the early stages of settlement. This pattern reflects the importance of gendered caregiving networks within refugee families. For instance, Sai Roong and Grace, who were eleven and fifteen years old when they arrived in Canada, described how they took on multiple responsibilities, including translating for their parents, assisting with caregiving, and managing school obligations. These experiences illustrate how caregiving roles can shift across generations during resettlement. At the same time, these relationships evolve. Sai Roong now receives caregiving support from her mother, enabling her to manage full-time employment while raising two young children without relying on daycare. Such patterns demonstrate the importance of what Collins describes as "organized, resilient, women-centred networks of bloodmothers and othermothers" (193). These intergenerational networks illustrate how women-centered forms of caregiving operate as collective strategies of resilience that sustain family well-being under conditions of displacement.

Participants also exercised agency through labour-market participation despite significant structural barriers. Several women reported working in jobs such as cleaning, cooking, or machining—positions that required limited English but provided opportunities to rebuild financial independence after years of restricted employment in refugee camps. Participants expressed appreciation for these opportunities even when the work offered limited advancement.

> He [husband] got a job through a referral from a Karen friend. He worked as a metal worker [machinist] because he didn't need to speak English. (Aye Than)
>
> When I moved to Canada, I worked at the hospital as a cleaner and cook while caring for my daughters. (Chi Chi)

Although these jobs often involved low wages and limited mobility, accepting them represented an important form of everyday agency that enabled families to regain economic autonomy and stability. Collins argues that agency emerges within oppression as a lived reality in which individuals make strategic choices shaped by their shifting social positions, including class, language ability, and citizenship status (292–293). In this context, securing employment through community referrals illustrates how Karen refugee families navigated labour-market constraints while rebuilding autonomy during resettlement.

Cultural and religious practices also played a crucial role in sustaining resilience and reinforcing maternal identities. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining Karen traditions, religious faith, and moral values in their parenting practices. For many women, church participation, prayer, and Bible reading provided emotional support during stressful resettlement periods. At the same time, mothers actively transmitted cultural values to their children in order to maintain a sense of identity and continuity across generations.

> "When I go to church, I tell my daughter to wear our traditional clothes… and to respect elders." (Nu Nu)
>
> "The Karen cultural value that I taught my children… was to be kind. The Karen are known for being hospitable." (Nya Nya Say)
>
> "My children need to know their roots, history, and their backgrounds… even though they were born here." (Sai Roong)

These maternal practices illustrate how refugee mothering extends beyond caregiving to include cultural transmission and identity formation. Through everyday acts such as teaching respect for

elders, maintaining traditional dress, and sharing stories about Karen history, mothers actively preserve cultural knowledge within their families. These practices reflect what Patricia Hill Collins describes as maternal practices that sustain community survival and cultural continuity (*Black Feminist Thought* 192), as well as what Andrea O'Reilly conceptualizes as motherhood not merely as a natural or biological function but as a cultural practice continuously reshaped by changing socioeconomic conditions whose meanings vary across time and place (*Matricentric Feminism* 16).

In summary, the experiences of Karen refugee women demonstrate how agency emerges through everyday maternal practices amid structural constraints. The intersectionality of refugee women's identities—including gender, race, ethnicity, migration status, class, and socioeconomic position—shapes both the challenges they encounter and the strategies they develop to navigate resettlement. Through caregiving, community support networks, labour participation, and cultural transmission, Karen refugee mothers transform everyday practices of mothering into meaningful forms of resilience and agency during the settlement process in Canada.

These findings extend theoretical understandings of refugee women's agency by illustrating how maternal labour functions simultaneously as care work, cultural preservation, and adaptive survival strategy within resettlement contexts. While matricentric feminism emphasizes the political significance of motherwork and Black feminist thought highlights the survival strategies embedded in maternal practices, the experiences of Karen refugee women demonstrate how these dynamics operate within the specific conditions of forced migration and resettlement. Positioned at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, migration status, and socioeconomic marginalization, Karen refugee mothers navigate institutional barriers while sustaining family stability and cultural continuity. Their everyday practices—learning new languages, mobilizing community networks, securing employment, and transmitting cultural values—reveal how agency is exercised through relational and collective forms of care rather than solely through individual autonomy. By foregrounding these maternal practices, my study contributes to migration and feminist scholarship by showing that refugee mothering is not simply a private domestic role but a socially embedded form of intersectional resistance through which women sustain resilience, negotiate structural inequalities, and rebuild family life across displacement and resettlement.

7.5 Youth Agency and Gendered Resilience in Refugee Integration

In this section, I examine how young Karen refugee women who arrived in Canada as children or adolescents exercise agency and contribute to integration, and how they navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their parents and other family members. My analysis draws on intersectionality as both an analytic and a methodological framework, mapping how settlement institutions, racialization, and gendered care work interact to shape the settlement trajectories of young Karen women. The matrix of domination further illuminates how these women navigate power across multiple domains: negotiating institutions (structural and disciplinary), resisting stereotypes (hegemonic), and sustaining intergenerational resilience through family and community relationships (interpersonal). Together, these frameworks reconceptualize integration not as a linear path toward adaptation, but as an ongoing relational negotiation of belonging, care, and resistance. While integration scholarship often focuses on adult migrants, this section demonstrates that young Karen women are not passive recipients of settlement support but rather invisible yet indispensable integration workers whose linguistic, emotional, and cultural labour sustains the everyday functioning of refugee households. Their narratives position integration not simply as an individual economic outcome, but as a relational, gendered, and intergenerational practice rooted in care, mediation, and belonging.

7.5.1 Young Women as Unacknowledged Integration Agents

A central pattern across the interviews was the rapid reversal of generational roles following resettlement. Although they arrived in Canada as children or adolescents, the young Karen women assumed adult-like responsibilities almost immediately, guiding their parents through schools, banks, healthcare systems, and other bureaucratic institutions. As Sai Roong explained, “As soon as we arrived in Canada, my parents relied on me… I became the parent and caregiver… I even attended my younger sister’s parent-teacher meetings” (Sai Roong). Daymu similarly recalled that “moving to Canada was a significant shift… I became the caregiver and had to look after my family, including my younger siblings.” Grace described how this role emerged through language barriers and institutional unfamiliarity:

“My parents did not really know the language until now, so they rely on me as a translator… The biggest issue was banking because they wanted to invest some money for saving, and terminology like banking stuff I didn’t know very well as a kid” (Grace).

Their narratives demonstrate that role reversal was not merely a private family adjustment but a response to the institutional demands of resettlement. Canadian settlement systems often assume linguistic fluency and bureaucratic literacy, placing newly arrived refugee families at a structural disadvantage. As a result, adolescent daughters frequently became responsible for mediating interactions with schools, healthcare providers, financial institutions, and government agencies. This pattern can be understood through Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the structural domain of power, which highlights how interconnected social institutions reproduce inequality through their routine procedures and expectations (*Black Feminist Thought* 295). Although these institutions appear formally neutral, they privilege those who already possess linguistic and cultural capital. Consequently, young Karen women were drawn into mediating roles not solely because of family dynamics but because institutional structures made their labour necessary.

Their experiences reveal what I conceptualize as *intergenerational integration brokerage*: unpaid, largely unrecognized labour through which young refugee women mediate between their families and settlement institutions. Acting as interpreters, advocates, and cultural brokers, they translated not only language but also bureaucratic procedures and institutional expectations. This finding supports Shields and Lujan's observation that refugee youth often function as unacknowledged settlement agents whose contributions remain largely invisible within formal frameworks (9). However, my findings extend this insight by demonstrating that such brokerage is deeply gendered and sustained over time.

By assuming these responsibilities while still navigating school and adolescence, these young women filled critical gaps left by formal settlement services. Their linguistic and institutional knowledge became an intergenerational resource, enabling their families to access services and avoid exclusion. From an intersectional perspective, this form of agency emerges at the intersection of age, gender, displacement, and linguistic capital. Positioned simultaneously as dependents and caregivers, young Karen women were not simply adapting to integration processes—they were actively making integration possible for their families.

7.5.2 Gendered Care, Cultural Continuity, and Belonging

Participants' everyday practices of caregiving and cultural transmission challenge assimilationist models of integration by demonstrating how belonging is actively produced rather than passively achieved. Rather than relinquishing Karen values, young women actively reinterpret and sustain

them within Canadian social contexts. Through child-rearing, community involvement, and language instruction, cultural preservation becomes a form of *care-based agency*. This reflects Patricia Hill Collins's notion of resistance within the matrix of domination, wherein marginalized actors generate alternative epistemologies from within systems of constraint (*Black Feminist Thought* 284).

The intergenerational transmission of Karen language, respect for elders, and Christian faith operates as what this study conceptualizes as relational integration labour—ongoing practices that anchor identity and continuity while navigating settlement. In this framing, integration is not a process of cultural erosion but a dynamic reworking of identity across space and time. As Wah explained, "I teach my kids to respect elders and remember where they come from. We go to Karen school every week" (Wah). Sai Roong similarly emphasized the importance of cultural memory: "My children need to know their roots, history, and background… I often share stories with my children about Karen, including watching videos online" (Sai Roong).

At the same time, participants actively negotiate gender and generational expectations in Canada. While maintaining familial respect and moral responsibility, they challenge gendered inequalities through educational aspirations, career planning, and expectations of partnership. Their understanding of equality as mutual care—rather than a strict "50–50" division of labour—points to the emergence of hybrid gender ethics shaped by both Karen cultural logics and Canadian social norms.

Together, these practices illustrate what this study conceptualizes as situated feminist agency: a relationally grounded form of action enacted through care, responsibility, and everyday decision-making rather than overt resistance. Participants' ability to occupy multiple roles—students, caregivers, mothers, and translators—positions them as emerging cultural and moral leaders within the Karen community. Despite its centrality, this labour remains largely unrecognized within dominant integration frameworks, which privilege economic participation and language acquisition as primary indicators of success. As Michaela Hynie argues, integration must be understood as a relational and affective process sustained through care networks, intergenerational reciprocity, and collective identity rather than individual achievement alone ("From the Outside In" 328–30).

7.5.3 Faith and Community as Emotional Infrastructure

Faith emerged as a central resource for navigating isolation, financial strain, and the uncertainties of resettlement. As Grace explained, "We are Christians, so most of the time when we face challenges, we pray to God and read the Bible. There are people in the community who help us pray. That gives us strength and less stress" (Grace). Wah similarly noted, "My faith in Jesus—that's how I turn challenges into opportunities" (Wah). These accounts demonstrate that faith operates not only as a coping mechanism but as a collectively sustained practice embedded in community relationships. Beyond individual belief, faith-based networks function as sites of emotional support, social connection, and collective care. Through prayer groups, church participation, and shared forms of support, young Karen women cultivate resilience in the absence of extended kin networks or sufficient institutional assistance.

In this context, faith does not simply reinforce cultural continuity but actively stabilizes everyday life amid uncertainty. This finding reflects Michaela Hynie's relational model of integration, which emphasizes that belonging is produced through social networks, reciprocity, and emotional security rather than individual achievement alone ("From the Outside In" 328–30). Faith and community thus constitute a form of emotional infrastructure—feminized, largely unpaid, and often overlooked—that sustains both well-being and social cohesion within refugee families.

7.5.4 Invisible yet Indispensable Contributors

This section examines how young Karen refugee women contribute to the integration of refugee families in Canada, highlighting their roles as interpreters, caregivers, cultural mediators, and moral anchors within the everyday processes of resettlement. Their experiences shift the analytical focus from individual adaptation to the collective and intergenerational processes that enable settlement. Through translation, caregiving, and ethical responsibility to family and community, these young women redefine "successful settlement" as shared stability and emotional well-being rather than individual self-sufficiency.

From an intersectional perspective, their dual positionality—as both dependents and decision-makers—illustrates how agency emerges within and against structures of power. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, marginalized actors often enact agency within structural constraints by transforming conditions of institutional marginalization into resources for survival and resilience. In this context, the everyday labour performed by young Karen women—though largely

unrecognized within policy and service frameworks—operates as a critical yet obscured foundation for sustaining family cohesion and community resilience during resettlement.

Five interrelated insights emerge from the findings. First, young Karen women serve as intergenerational mediators who bridge families and institutions through linguistic interpretation and bureaucratic navigation. Second, their emotional and caregiving responsibilities constitute an underrecognized foundation that supports both settlement processes and the maintenance of cultural continuity. Third, they actively negotiate gender and cultural expectations, producing hybrid forms of womanhood shaped by both Karen cultural values and Canadian social contexts. Fourth, faith and community networks provide key forms of emotional support that foster resilience in the face of uncertainty. Finally, these interconnected practices reframe integration success as the collective well-being of families and communities rather than individual advancement alone.

Taken together, these findings foreground the central yet overlooked role of young refugee women in sustaining settlement processes. Their translation, caregiving, and cultural practices are not peripheral to integration; they constitute the relational conditions that make it possible. Recognizing these contributions reframes integration as a process rooted in interdependence, care, and intergenerational responsibility rather than individual achievement alone. The experiences of young Karen women therefore demonstrate that integration is not about abandoning the past but about sustaining continuity while building collective resilience in a new social context.

7.6 Decentering Integration

In this section, I re-examine refugee integration by moving beyond dominant policy frameworks that define "successful settlement" through narrow outcome-based indicators such as employment and language proficiency. Drawing on Michaela Hynie's intersectional and relational framework, I situate integration as a socially embedded process shaped by gender, generation, and institutional conditions. Rather than treating integration as a linear trajectory toward economic self-sufficiency, this section examines how it is negotiated through everyday practices, family relations, and cultural meanings. The analysis proceeds by examining gender equality as a culturally situated practice, intergenerational perceptions of "successful settlement," and the politics of belonging through identity formation and community leadership, before turning to refugee epistemologies that offer alternative ways of understanding integration from participants' perspectives.

7.6.1 Gender Equality as Culturally Situated Practice

Dominant policy frameworks in Canada frame gender equality as a universal benchmark of successful integration, often measured by labour-market participation, educational attainment, and individual autonomy. As outlined in the literature review, such indicators reflect assimilationist tendencies that evaluate refugees against standardized norms while overlooking the structural conditions shaping their capacities (Hynie, "Refugee Integration" 265–67). This approach risks misrecognizing refugee women—particularly those with interrupted education, caregiving responsibilities, or limited language access—as failing to integrate, even though these outcomes are structured by unequal starting points and institutional constraints. In contrast, Hynie's intersectional framework conceptualizes integration as shaped by the interaction of gender, age, migration history, and socio-economic conditions (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 321–22, 326). From this perspective, gender equality is better understood as a situated practice rather than a universal endpoint.

My interview findings show that Karen refugee women define gender equality in terms of relational values rather than individual economic independence. Participants emphasized cooperation, mutual respect, and shared decision-making, framing equality as maintaining family cohesion rather than pursuing individual autonomy. This aligns with Hynie's argument that integration is shaped by culturally embedded practices rather than a singular model of adaptation ("*From the Outside In"* 319, 333). These accounts do not indicate a lack of integration; rather, they reveal forms of social organization that remain unrecognized within policy definitions of success. At the same time, these practices are reconfigured under resettlement conditions. Institutional demands—especially language and system navigation—reshape gendered roles across generations. Younger women, particularly those who arrived as children, serve as linguistic and institutional intermediaries, taking on decision-making responsibilities within the household. This reflects the uneven distribution of integration constraints across intersecting social positions (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 326). Gender equality, therefore, is not only negotiated between men and women but is restructured through intergenerational dynamics.

For older women, caregiving remains central but becomes more complex in the absence of extended family support. Their emphasis on mothering and cultural transmission reflects forms of labour often marginalized in integration frameworks that prioritize economic productivity (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 322, 327). While such frameworks implicitly treat caregiving as a constraint,

the findings show that it functions as a key site of agency sustaining family stability, cultural continuity, and belonging. These practices align with Hynie's conceptualization of social and subjective integration, where relational bonds and emotional security are central but difficult to measure (323–25). Building on the theoretical framework, the findings suggest that gender equality in refugee integration cannot be reduced to standardized indicators; rather, it must be understood through relational and context-specific practices shaped by care, responsibility, and structural conditions.

7.6.2 Intergenerational Perceptions of "Successful Settlement"

Policy-driven, outcome-based frameworks define "successful settlement" in terms of employment, language proficiency, and economic self-sufficiency, presenting integration as a measurable progression toward individual productivity. As discussed in the literature review, this model assumes comparable starting points despite structural inequalities in access to resources and opportunities (Hynie, "Refugee Integration: Research and Policy" 265–67). In contrast, Hynie conceptualizes integration as shaped by intersecting identities and local contexts, in which the meanings of success vary across social positions (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 321–22, 326).

The findings demonstrate that Karen refugee women articulate "successful settlement" through distinct intergenerational perspectives. Younger women emphasize emotional security, stability, and future-oriented mobility. Their accounts highlight safety, education, and employment, but also stress affective dimensions such as "feeling at home." These align with Hynie's concept of subjective integration, where belonging and psychological well-being are central (323–25).

Older women, by contrast, define success relationally, centering their children's progress and family stability. Rather than individual achievement, they evaluate settlement through intergenerational advancement and access to structural resources such as healthcare and citizenship. This reflects gendered patterns in integration priorities, where women emphasize family unity over individual economic outcomes (Hynie, *From the Outside In* 327). These differences show that "successful settlement" is not a singular concept but varies across age, gender, and institutional positioning. Younger women navigate dominant pathways while maintaining relational priorities, whereas older women assess success collectively within family contexts. This divergence reinforces Hynie's argument that integration cannot be measured through uniform benchmarks (Hynie 265; *From the Outside In* 326). Rather than a fixed endpoint,

"successful settlement" emerges as a relational construct shaped by emotional security, family well-being, and intergenerational responsibility.

7.6.3 Politics of Belonging: Intergenerational Identity and Community Leadership

Integration frameworks often treat belonging as an outcome of economic participation. However, research shows that belonging is shaped by gendered constraints such as caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, and limited access to services (Phillimore 585–87). These conditions demonstrate that belonging is structured by institutional inequalities rather than achieved solely through individual adaptation. Consistent with Hynie, belonging must be understood through social relationships, cultural practices, and institutional contexts (*From the Outside In* 323–25, 328). The findings show that Karen women actively foster a sense of belonging through cultural transmission. Older women sustain values such as respect and hospitality through everyday practices of teaching and caregiving. These practices function as mechanisms of continuity across displacement rather than resistance to integration.

Younger women negotiate belonging through bicultural identity formation, mediating between family expectations and Canadian institutions. Their roles as daughters, mothers, and cultural mediators enable them to construct hybrid forms of belonging that coexist across cultural contexts. Belonging is also enacted through community leadership. Younger women develop social networks through early participation and later assume leadership roles in language teaching, community organizing, and newcomer support. These practices embed care within civic participation while also reflecting structural gaps in settlement services. Their leadership is therefore shaped by both agency and necessity, reinforcing Phillimore's argument that integration requires institutional responsiveness (Phillimore 579–80). These findings show that belonging is actively produced through intergenerational practices of care, culture, and leadership, rather than passively achieved through integration outcomes.

7.6.4 Refugee Epistemologies of Integration

The four dimensions of emotional integration, intergenerational role reversals, cultural transmission, and youth leadership underscore the limitations of state-centric integration metrics that prioritize language, employment, and service access. These measures render integration legible to institutions but fail to capture emotional belonging, caregiving, and the gendered labour

of mediation performed by younger women. For many participants, settlement involved "growing up fast" through schooling, translation, and bureaucratic responsibilities—forms of labour largely invisible within these metrics.

Drawing on Collins's standpoint epistemology and Crenshaw's intersectionality, these narratives produce a refugee epistemology of integration—knowledge grounded in marginalized experiences and everyday practices of care and survival. Karen women's accounts show that integration is better understood through embodied and relational experiences rather than abstract policy indicators. These accounts position refugee women as knowledge producers who reveal the limits of dominant frameworks. This perspective extends Hynie's critique of universalist models by highlighting how they are shaped by implicit assumptions that the host society is culturally homogeneous and unchanging (*From the Outside In* 319). The findings show that integration outcomes are shaped not only by individual effort but by institutional accessibility and systemic constraints (328, 331–32). In this context, participants' narratives reveal the inadequacy of dominant frameworks rather than a failure to integrate. At the same time, the findings identify alternative indicators of settlement: emotional safety, cultural continuity, intergenerational support, and community participation. These dimensions are not secondary but central to sustaining a sense of belonging. Centering refugee epistemologies shifts the analytical focus from institutional measures to participant-defined meanings of settlement, reframing integration as an ongoing negotiation of care, recognition, and belonging under unequal conditions.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, cannot be adequately understood through linear or outcome-based models of integration. Across the discussion, I have shown that integration is shaped by intergenerational location, gendered responsibilities, migration history, and unequal institutional conditions. The findings reveal that settlement is not a uniform process of adaptation, but a differentiated and ongoing negotiation structured by caregiving, emotional labour, cultural continuity, and community participation. By bringing the empirical material into dialogue with intersectionality, Collins's matrix of domination, matricentric feminism, and Hynie's relational framework of integration, this chapter has demonstrated that Karen refugee women's experiences are better understood through

the interplay of structural constraint and everyday agency than through narrow measures of labour-market participation or language acquisition alone.

A central contribution of this chapter is its analysis of how age at arrival shapes divergent integration pathways. Women who arrived in adulthood encountered significant barriers related to interrupted education, limited English proficiency, and the intensification of caregiving responsibilities, whereas those who arrived as children or adolescents were better positioned to access schooling in Canada and navigate institutions and employment. Yet these younger women were not simply beneficiaries of smoother integration pathways. They also assumed substantial intergenerational responsibilities as interpreters, brokers, caregivers, and cultural mediators, often compensating for the structural limitations their parents faced. Integration, therefore, emerged not as an individual achievement, but as a deeply interdependent process sustained through family labour and intergenerational adaptation.

The chapter has also shown that refugee mothering must be understood as more than a private domestic responsibility. For Karen women, caregiving, cultural transmission, and emotional support operated as socially embedded practices through which families navigated displacement and resettlement. Drawing on O'Reilly and Collins, I argued that these maternal practices function as forms of intersectional resistance: they respond to structural inequalities while sustaining family cohesion, cultural identity, and community continuity. At the same time, the findings complicate simplistic interpretations of gender roles by showing that caregiving was often experienced as both burden and meaningful responsibility. Gendered labour within Karen refugee households was not static, but continually renegotiated in response to institutional pressures, employment demands, and intergenerational shifts in language and authority.

Another key argument advanced in this chapter is that young Karen refugee women are indispensable but insufficiently recognized actors in the integration process. Their translation work, emotional care, community engagement, and cultural leadership reveal forms of agency that are largely invisible within formal policy definitions of successful settlement. By sustaining intergenerational support networks, leading community initiatives, and preserving cultural knowledge, these women actively shape the conditions of belonging for their families and communities. Their experiences challenge integration frameworks that privilege individual autonomy and economic productivity, foregrounding the collective, relational, and gendered labour through which settlement is made possible.

Finally, this chapter argued for decentering integration by taking refugee epistemologies of settlement seriously. Karen women's narratives show that emotional safety, family stability, cultural continuity, and intergenerational support are not secondary to integration, but central to how it is understood and lived. Their accounts expose the limits of policy-driven and universalist models that assume a homogeneous host society and measure success through standardized benchmarks. In contrast, the findings support a more relational and context-sensitive understanding of integration, recognizing refugees as knowledge producers whose lived experiences offer alternative ways to define belonging, participation, and success. Seen in this light, integration is not best understood as conformity to pre-existing norms, but as an uneven and ongoing process through which refugee women negotiate care, recognition, and community under conditions of structural inequality.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Conclusion

8.1 Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I bring together the central findings and contributions of this dissertation by revisiting the research questions, synthesizing the core arguments, and clarifying the study's theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and practical significance. Rather than introducing new empirical material, I consolidate the analysis developed in the previous chapters to demonstrate how the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, challenge dominant understandings of refugee integration.

In Section 8.2, I revisit the research questions and objectives, showing how the findings illuminate the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of displacement, resettlement, and integration. I demonstrate that settlement is shaped by motherhood, caregiving responsibilities, language barriers, and intergenerational role reversals, and that integration is interpreted differently across generations. I also highlight the central but often unrecognized contributions of young Karen women to family integration.

In Section 8.3, I articulate the dissertation's core arguments, advancing the claim that refugee integration is fundamentally gendered, intergenerational, and relational. In Section 8.4, I outline the study's theoretical contributions by showing how the findings extend intersectionality, matricentric feminism, and relational approaches to refugee integration. In Section 8.5, I develop the dissertation's conceptual contribution by proposing relational care-based integration and advancing the concept of refugee epistemologies of integration, which centre refugee women's own knowledge, priorities, and everyday practices.

In Section 8.6, I identify the empirical contributions of the study, particularly its evidence on caregiving as a central structure of integration, the significance of intergenerational role reversal, and refugee-defined meanings of successful settlement. In Section 8.7, I discuss the policy and practice implications, calling for more flexible, gender-responsive, and relationally informed approaches to settlement support. Section 8.8 outlines the study's limitations, and Section 8.9 proposes directions for future research, including work on citizenship, belonging, and statelessness.

I conclude the chapter with a final reflection that reaffirms the central argument of this dissertation: refugee integration cannot be adequately understood through narrow, outcome-based models alone. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing, uneven, and socially situated process produced through care, interdependence, cultural continuity, and the everyday labour of refugee women across generations.

8.2 Revisiting the Research Questions and Objectives

In this section, I revisit the research questions and objectives that guided this dissertation in order to synthesize how the findings address the gendered, intersectional, and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration among Karen women in London, Ontario, Canada. Rather than restating individual findings, I draw together key insights to demonstrate how integration is experienced, interpreted, and actively produced through everyday practices, family dynamics, and structural conditions.

8.2.1 Gendered and Intersectional Impacts of Displacement and Resettlement

The first research question examined the gendered and intersectional impacts of displacement and resettlement on Karen refugee women and girls, how Karen mothers and daughters navigate adversities in the settlement process, and how gender roles are perceived and negotiated across generations. The findings show that these impacts are most clearly structured through motherhood, caregiving responsibilities, and intergenerational role shifts, shaped by the intersection of gender, age at arrival, language proficiency, migration history, and cultural expectations.

For women who arrived in Canada as adult mothers, the most challenging aspect of settlement was mothering in a new country. Participants consistently described the pressure of raising children while navigating unfamiliar educational, healthcare, and social systems, often with limited English proficiency. These challenges were not primarily framed in economic terms but were embedded in everyday caregiving responsibilities, including supporting children's education, communicating with institutions, ensuring safety, and maintaining emotional stability within the family. In this context, motherhood functioned as the central site through which displacement was experienced. These caregiving roles are not merely private responsibilities but are deeply shaped by cultural legacy, where mothering, caregiving, and intergenerational responsibility structure both stress and resilience in resettlement. The impacts of displacement, therefore, emerge through the

intersection of gendered expectations and structural constraints, particularly language barriers and institutional unfamiliarity.

By contrast, younger women who arrived as children or adolescents identified role reversal and accelerated responsibility as the most difficult aspect of settlement. Rather than experiencing mothering as their initial challenge, they described the sudden expectation to take on adult roles within the family. Due to faster language acquisition and greater familiarity with Canadian institutions, they took on roles as interpreters, caregivers, and mediators for their parents while simultaneously navigating school. This redistribution of responsibility reflects how cultural expectations of caregiving intersect with institutional demands, leading younger women to assume premature authority within the household. Their experiences illustrate that the gendered impacts of displacement are not uniform but are shaped by life-course position and access to linguistic and institutional resources.

The findings further demonstrate that Karen mothers and daughters navigate these adversities through relational and culturally grounded strategies of agency. Adult-arrival mothers relied on persistence, informal networks, and practical adjustments such as prioritizing children in employment decisions and structuring family routines around caregiving needs. Younger women supported their families through translation, institutional mediation, and caregiving responsibilities. Across both generations, women mobilized key coping strategies, including reliance on family and women-centred networks, participation in community and faith-based activities, and maintaining optimism about future opportunities. These strategies reflect what I conceptualize as everyday forms of agency, through which refugee women actively negotiate structural constraints via care, cultural transmission, and relational support, in line with broader scholarship that highlights how agency is enacted through everyday coping and context-specific practices rather than solely through resistance or individual autonomy (Kanal and Rottmann)

Gender roles were similarly characterized by both continuity and negotiation across generations, shaped in part by cultural legacy. Participants consistently described gendered divisions of labour rooted in Karen cultural norms, particularly the expectation that women assume primary caregiving responsibilities. However, these roles were not experienced as purely restrictive. Many women interpreted caregiving as meaningful and aligned with their cultural values, while also adapting these roles to new social and economic conditions. Younger women, in particular, described more flexible arrangements, including shared decision-making, co-

parenting, and strategic employment choices that accommodate caregiving responsibilities. Participants also defined gender equality in relational terms—emphasizing cooperation, mutual respect, and shared responsibility—rather than in terms of individual autonomy. This suggests that gender roles are not simply maintained or transformed but are reinterpreted through the interaction between cultural traditions and the demands of resettlement.

Finally, the findings highlight that the emotional dimensions of resettlement are deeply gendered and intergenerational, particularly through stressors such as role reversal, place-related anxieties, and fears of cultural loss. Mothers expressed concern about children's safety, changing norms, and the erosion of cultural values, while daughters experienced pressure from balancing school with caregiving and translation responsibilities. These stressors reflect the dual nature of cultural legacy as both a source of resilience and a site of tension, where efforts to maintain cultural continuity can generate emotional strain under new institutional conditions.

In sum, these findings demonstrate that the impacts of displacement and resettlement are fundamentally gendered and intersectional, yet experienced differently across generations. For adult-arrival mothers, these impacts are concentrated on the intensified demands of motherhood within unfamiliar institutional contexts. For younger women, they are expressed through role reversal and early responsibility in navigating systems on behalf of their families. Karen mothers and daughters navigate these adversities through relational, care-based, and culturally grounded strategies, while gender roles are continuously negotiated across generations through both continuity and adaptive change. Settlement, therefore, emerges as an interdependent and culturally embedded process shaped by structural constraints, family dynamics, and everyday practices of agency.

8.2.2 Intergenerational Experiences and Interpretations of Integration

The second research question examined how Karen refugee women across two generations experience, interpret, and shape integration processes differently. The findings show that integration is not only experienced differently across generations but is also interpreted through distinct evaluative frameworks, shaped by age at arrival, life-course position, and family responsibilities.

For women who arrived in Canada as adults, integration occurred under conditions of limited English proficiency, interrupted education, and immediate caregiving responsibilities.

These conditions shaped how they interpreted integration: not as personal advancement, but as a long-term, often incomplete process centred on family outcomes and structural stability. Many older women did not describe themselves as having achieved a successful settlement, even after many years in Canada. Instead, they evaluated success primarily through their children's progress. Their accounts show a consistent pattern of self-minimization, where their own struggles—particularly with language—remained central to how they assessed their settlement. Several women explicitly stated that while their children might be on the path to success, they themselves had not achieved it.

At the same time, older women did not define success solely in relational terms. Their interpretations also included concrete structural markers, such as obtaining Canadian citizenship, accessing public services, achieving stable housing, and attaining financial and social security. However, even when these milestones were achieved, many described their settlement as partial or ongoing, rather than complete. Some framed their experience as "halfway," indicating that integration was not a fixed endpoint but a continuing process shaped by ongoing challenges, particularly language barriers and limited opportunities for upward mobility. In this sense, older women understood integration as a collective and cumulative process, measured through both family progress and incremental structural gains, rather than individual accomplishment.

By contrast, women who arrived as children or adolescents interpreted integration through their own educational, social, and emotional trajectories. Their earlier access to schooling and language acquisition enabled them to engage more directly with Canadian institutions, shaping a different understanding of settlement. Younger women tended to define successful settlement in terms of personal development, emotional stability, and future-oriented achievement. Their accounts emphasized completing education, securing employment, achieving independence, and contributing to both family and society. At the same time, their interpretations extended beyond material outcomes to include affective dimensions such as feeling safe, having "no worries," and experiencing a sense of home and belonging in Canada. For some, successful settlement meant reaching a point where life felt stable enough to plan, rather than simply managing immediate challenges.

Younger women also interpreted integration as a process that allowed them to exercise agency and mobility, including choosing careers aligned with their interests, supporting their families financially, and participating in community life. However, their definitions were not

entirely individualistic. While they emphasized personal achievement, they continued to frame success in relation to family responsibility and collective well-being, reflecting an ongoing connection between individual and relational forms of integration.

Differences between the two generations are also evident in how integration is linked to time and expectation. Younger women often described specific moments when they began to feel settled—such as after gaining employment, completing education, or achieving emotional stability. Older women, however, rarely identified a clear point of arrival. Instead, they described settlement as an ongoing process without a definitive endpoint, shaped by continued challenges and evolving expectations for themselves and their children.

These contrasting interpretations demonstrate that integration is not a singular concept but one whose meaning shifts across generations. Younger women tend to interpret integration as a process of becoming—marked by growth, belonging, and future possibility—while older women interpret it as a process of securing—marked by family stability, children's success, and gradual access to structural resources. Integration, therefore, is best understood as a life-course and intergenerational process, in which its meaning is shaped by women's positions within family, community, and institutional contexts.

8.2.3 Youth Contributions to the Integration Process

The third research question examined the extent to which young Karen refugee women contribute to the integration process and how they navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their families. The findings demonstrate that young women play a central and indispensable role in enabling family integration, particularly through their linguistic, emotional, and cultural labour within both household and institutional contexts.

A defining contribution of young women lies in their role as intergenerational mediators, emerging from the rapid reversal of generational responsibilities following resettlement. Participants who arrived as children or adolescents assumed adult-like responsibilities at an early stage, primarily because their parents had limited English proficiency and were unfamiliar with Canadian institutional systems. They became responsible for interpreting in interactions with schools, healthcare providers, financial institutions, and government services, often navigating complex bureaucratic processes while still developing their own language skills. This form of mediation was not occasional support but a continuous responsibility that enabled families to

access essential services and participate in institutional life. In this sense, young women functioned as key intermediaries who translated not only language but also institutional expectations and procedures.

This role extended beyond linguistic mediation to include emotional and relational labour, which was central to sustaining family stability during settlement. Young women were required to manage the pressures of interpreting sensitive information, supporting parental decision-making, and maintaining family cohesion, all while navigating their own educational and developmental trajectories. These responsibilities produced significant emotional strain, including stress, anxiety, and a sense of premature adulthood. At the same time, this process contributed to the development of confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of responsibility. Their experiences demonstrate that integration is sustained not only through formal systems but through unpaid, gendered emotional labour that remains largely unrecognized within policy frameworks.

Young women also contributed to integration by bridging institutional, cultural, and generational divides. Their familiarity with Canadian education systems, social norms, and bureaucratic processes positioned them as key actors in facilitating family adaptation. At the same time, their continued engagement with Karen cultural practices enabled them to maintain household continuity. This dual positioning highlights that integration is not a one-directional process of adaptation but a relational negotiation across multiple social contexts, carried out through everyday practices of translation, coordination, and support.

In addition, young women played a significant role in cultural transmission and identity formation, particularly as they became mothers and community participants. They actively taught their children Karen language, values, and traditions and engaged in community-based cultural and religious activities. These practices were not passive reproductions of tradition but deliberate efforts to sustain identity and belonging in a new environment. Cultural transmission, therefore, functioned as a form of care-based agency, enabling families to maintain continuity while navigating the demands of resettlement.

Their contributions also extended to community engagement and leadership, where participation in cultural programs, language teaching, and support for newcomers facilitated broader processes of collective integration. These activities demonstrate that young women's roles are not confined to the private sphere but operate across family, community, and institutional levels. Importantly, many of these forms of leadership emerged from earlier experiences of

responsibility, indicating that the burdens of early settlement were transformed into capacities for social participation and community support. In several cases, young women also actively sought to address gaps in settlement services by assuming roles as community youth leaders, responding to unmet needs such as the lack of interpretation support and limited access to culturally appropriate resources, including traditional Karen food within refugee reception settings.

Faith and community networks further shaped how young women navigated resettlement challenges. Religious practices and church-based relationships provided emotional support, social connection, and a framework for interpreting hardship. These networks served as an emotional infrastructure, enabling young women to cope with stress, sustain cultural identity, and build a sense of belonging. Through these collective practices, individual challenges were transformed into shared experiences of resilience and support.

Despite the centrality of these contributions, young women's labour remains largely invisible within dominant models of integration, which prioritize individual economic outcomes and language acquisition. Their work as interpreters, caregivers, cultural mediators, and community contributors is unpaid, gendered, and often unrecognized within both institutional and policy contexts. However, the findings demonstrate that this labour is foundational to the functioning of refugee households and the broader process of settlement.

These findings show that young Karen refugee women are not passive recipients of integration but active producers of integration processes. Their contributions reveal that integration is fundamentally relational, sustained through care, interdependence, and intergenerational responsibility. By centering their roles, this study challenges dominant frameworks that overlook unpaid and gendered labour and demonstrates that such contributions are essential to understanding how refugee integration unfolds in everyday life.

8.3 Core Arguments

This dissertation advances four central arguments that reconceptualize refugee integration as a gendered, intergenerational, and relational process. These arguments emerge directly from the empirical findings and challenge dominant integration frameworks that prioritize individual economic outcomes and linear adaptation.

First, this study argues that refugee integration is fundamentally structured by gendered caregiving responsibilities, particularly motherhood, rather than by economic participation.

The findings demonstrate that for Karen refugee women, settlement is experienced most intensely through caregiving roles that organize everyday life, shape access to institutions, and structure interactions with schools, healthcare systems, and social services. Motherhood operates as a key site where structural constraints—such as language barriers, limited institutional familiarity, and restricted labour-market access—are encountered and negotiated. These caregiving responsibilities are not incidental but central to how displacement is experienced and managed. This argument challenges integration models that treat employment and language acquisition as primary indicators by showing that integration is deeply embedded in reproductive and care labour that remains largely invisible within policy frameworks.

Second, this study argues that refugee integration is a life-course process in which age at arrival produces distinct yet interconnected integration pathways and settlement meanings. The findings show that women who arrived in adulthood and those who arrived as children or adolescents do not simply experience different trajectories; they also interpret integration differently. Adult-arrival mothers tend to understand integration as a process of securing family stability and achieving incremental structural gains, often without perceiving their own settlement as complete. In contrast, youth-arrival women interpret integration through personal development, emotional belonging, and future-oriented mobility. These generational differences demonstrate that integration cannot be understood as a uniform outcome but must be analyzed as a socially situated process shaped by age at arrival, educational access, and family roles across the life course. This argument extends existing scholarship by showing that integration is not only structurally differentiated but also subjectively interpreted in generationally distinct ways.

Third, this study argues that young refugee women function as central but largely unrecognized agents of integration through their everyday labour of mediation, caregiving, and coordination. The findings reveal that young Karen women play a critical role in enabling family settlement by acting as interpreters, institutional navigators, and decision-making intermediaries. Their contributions extend beyond language translation to include emotional labour, cultural mediation, and support for family adaptation within unfamiliar systems. This labour emerges from structural conditions that require linguistic and institutional competence, positioning young women as key actors in bridging families and institutions. At the same time, these responsibilities place emotional strain on individuals and accelerate transitions into adulthood. By identifying these processes as forms of intergenerational and gendered integration work, this study challenges

dominant frameworks that overlook unpaid and relational labour, demonstrating that integration is actively produced within families rather than delivered solely through formal services.

Fourth, this study argues that refugee integration is best understood as a relational process sustained through interdependence, cultural continuity, and collective forms of belonging. Across both generations, integration unfolds through networks of care, faith-based communities, and practices of cultural transmission that connect family members and sustain identity over time. These practices do not signal resistance to integration; instead, they actively support stability, resilience, and a sense of belonging during the resettlement process. Cultural teaching, community participation, and religious engagement operate as everyday practices through which families sustain identity, transmit values across generations, and actively manage the disruptions of displacement in the resettlement process. This argument challenges assimilationist assumptions by demonstrating that integration does not require abandoning cultural identity but is achieved through its active reinterpretation and reproduction within new institutional and social environments.

Together, these arguments demonstrate that refugee integration cannot be reduced to individual adaptation or economic incorporation. Instead, it must be understood as a gendered, intergenerational, and relational process, produced through everyday practices of care, negotiation, and collective responsibility. By centering the experiences of Karen refugee women, this study highlights the limitations of dominant integration frameworks and offers a more grounded understanding of how settlement is experienced, interpreted, and sustained across generations.

8.4 Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation makes four key theoretical contributions to scholarship on refugee integration, intersectionality, and feminist migration studies. Grounding theoretical frameworks in the empirical experiences of Karen refugee women extends existing approaches and offers a more nuanced understanding of integration as a gendered, intergenerational, and relational process.

First, this study extends intersectionality beyond its conventional application as a framework for identifying overlapping forms of disadvantage by demonstrating how intersecting systems of power are actively negotiated through everyday practices of care, mediation, and cultural continuity. While Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualizes intersectionality as a critique of single-axis analysis and Patricia Hill Collins develops the matrix of domination to explain how power operates

across structural and interpersonal domains, this study shows how these dynamics are experienced, enacted, and negotiated within family and institutional contexts. The findings demonstrate that intersectionality is not only a structure of constraint but also a site of relational agency, where refugee women respond to structural inequalities through caregiving, translation, and community-based practices. In doing so, this study shifts intersectionality from a primarily diagnostic framework toward an everyday, practice-based understanding of how power is negotiated in resettlement contexts.

Second, this study advances matricentric feminism by demonstrating that refugee mothering is not only a site of resistance but also a central mechanism through which integration is enacted and sustained. Building on Andrea O'Reilly's conceptualization of motherwork as a politicized and socially structured practice, this dissertation shows that caregiving is not peripheral to integration but constitutes one of its primary organizing processes. Mothering shapes how women engage with institutions, make employment decisions, and structure family life under conditions of displacement. At the same time, maternal practices—such as cultural transmission, emotional support, and intergenerational care—serve as strategies that help families maintain continuity and navigate structural constraints. This contribution reframes mothering not only as resistance to marginalization but as a foundational site where integration is practiced, negotiated, and reproduced across generations.

Third, this study extends Michaela Hynie's relational and decentered model of integration by demonstrating that integration is not only relational but also intergenerationally produced through unevenly distributed labour within families. While Hynie conceptualizes integration as a multidimensional and reciprocal process shaped by social relationships and institutional contexts, this dissertation shows that these relational processes are sustained through specific forms of labour, particularly those carried out by women and girls. The findings highlight how young refugee women act as mediators between families and institutions, performing linguistic, emotional, and cultural work that enables access to services and supports family adaptation. This contribution refines relational integration by identifying the gendered and generational distribution of integration labour, demonstrating that integration is not equally experienced or practiced but is structured through asymmetries of responsibility within families.

Fourth, this study reconceptualizes refugee integration as a relational, interdependent, and culturally embedded process that challenges assimilationist and outcome-based models. Dominant

frameworks conceptualize integration as a linear progression toward economic participation and cultural conformity. In contrast, this dissertation demonstrates that integration unfolds through ongoing negotiations of belonging, care, and identity across family, community, and institutional contexts. Practices such as cultural transmission, faith-based engagement, and community participation are not residual or secondary aspects of settlement but are central mechanisms through which stability, resilience, and belonging are produced. By foregrounding these practices, this study advances a theoretical shift from integration as individual adaptation to integration as collective, care-based, and culturally situated practice.

Together, these contributions offer a reorientation of refugee integration theory. Rather than viewing integration as an outcome achieved through individual effort or institutional incorporation, this dissertation demonstrates that it is an ongoing, negotiated process shaped by intersectional power relations, intergenerational dynamics, and everyday practices of care. By centering refugee women's lived experiences and situated knowledge, this study not only extends existing theoretical frameworks but also challenges their underlying assumptions, offering a more inclusive and grounded understanding of how integration is produced and sustained in practice.

8.5 Conceptual Contribution: Rethinking Integration

This dissertation proposes a reconceptualization of refugee integration as a process best understood through what I term *relational care-based integration*. This concept emerges from the empirical findings and challenges dominant models that frame integration primarily as an individual, outcome-driven process measured through employment, language acquisition, and economic self-sufficiency. Relational care-based integration refers to a form of integration produced through everyday practices of caregiving, interdependence, and intergenerational responsibility, rather than achieved solely through individual adaptation. It emphasizes that integration is not accomplished independently but is collectively practiced within families and communities, where responsibilities, resources, and forms of agency are unevenly distributed across gender and generation.

This study demonstrates that integration unfolds through the gendered organization of care, particularly through motherhood and family responsibilities. For adult-arrival women, caregiving structures engagement with institutions and shapes experiences of displacement and resettlement. Efforts to raise children, navigate schools and healthcare systems, and maintain family stability

show that integration is practiced through care rather than solely through external indicators of success. Caregiving, therefore, is not peripheral but constitutes a primary mechanism of settlement. At the same time, integration is sustained through intergenerational labour, particularly the contributions of young refugee women. As interpreters, mediators, and decision-making intermediaries, they enable families to access institutional resources and navigate unfamiliar systems. Their linguistic and emotional labour demonstrates that integration relies on coordination across generations rather than equal or individual participation. These dynamics reveal how integration processes are structured by asymmetries of responsibility, in which certain family members—often young women—carry a disproportionate share of this work.

Relational care-based integration also highlights the importance of *cultural continuity and collective belonging*. Practices such as cultural transmission, religious participation, and community engagement help families maintain their identity while adapting to new social contexts. These practices do not signal resistance to integration; instead, they support stability, resilience, and belonging. Integration, therefore, involves not the abandonment of prior identities but their ongoing reinterpretation within new institutional and social environments.

This conceptualization also challenges the assumption that integration is linear or complete. The findings show that integration is often ongoing, incomplete, and uneven, particularly across generations. While younger women may identify moments of achievement or belonging, older women frequently describe settlement as unfinished, measured through their children's futures and incremental structural gains such as citizenship or housing. Integration is thus better understood as a process without a fixed endpoint, shaped by evolving expectations and life-course transitions.

By introducing relational care-based integration, this study offers a conceptual framework that captures the everyday, gendered, and interdependent nature of settlement. It shifts the focus from individual outcomes to collective practices, from institutional indicators to everyday caregiving and family responsibilities, and from assimilation to relational belonging. This perspective provides a more grounded account of how integration unfolds and calls for rethinking its theorization, measurement, and support. Building on this framework, the study further advances the argument for *decentering integration through refugee epistemologies*. The findings demonstrate that state-centric models—focused on language proficiency, employment, and service

uptake—are insufficient for capturing how integration is understood and practiced within refugee families.

The empirical evidence highlights four interconnected dimensions—emotional integration, intergenerational role reversals, cultural transmission, and youth leadership—that remain largely invisible within institutional frameworks. These dimensions show that settlement is not only a matter of functional adaptation but is sustained through caregiving responsibilities, relational support, and cultural continuity. Younger women's dual roles as students and family mediators illustrate how integration is facilitated through translation, decision-making, and institutional navigation on behalf of their families. Drawing on the intersectional insights of Kimberlé Crenshaw and the standpoint epistemology of Patricia Hill Collins, this study conceptualizes refugee epistemologies of integration as forms of knowledge produced through caregiving, community participation, and cultural practices. These epistemologies emerge from women's social positions within families and institutions and shape how integration is interpreted, evaluated, and sustained outside formal policy frameworks. The findings further demonstrate that knowledge production is shaped by intergenerational dynamics, where responsibilities, authority, and agency shift across age and life-course positions.

Consistent with Michaela Hynie's critique of outcome-based models, the findings show that institutional barriers—such as limited language access and rigid service structures—undermine emotional well-being and social inclusion, even when formal indicators of integration are present. In response, participants articulated alternative understandings of successful settlement, emphasizing emotional security, cultural continuity, strong intergenerational support networks, and youth contributions as key markers of integration. Centering refugee epistemologies shifts analytical focus from how integration is measured by institutions to how it is defined and practiced by refugees themselves. This perspective challenges frameworks that position refugees as passive recipients of services and instead recognizes them as active agents and knowledge producers. By foregrounding these epistemologies, this study reframes integration as a relational, care-based, and culturally grounded process, while also exposing the limitations of models that fail to account for the gendered and intergenerational labour through which settlement is sustained.

8.6 Empirical Contributions

In this dissertation, I make several important empirical contributions to the study of refugee integration by providing detailed, comparative, and intergenerational evidence on the settlement experiences of Karen refugee women in Canada. Through qualitative analysis of adult-arrival mothers and youth-arrival women, this study offers new insights into the gendered, relational, and intergenerational dynamics of integration that remain underexamined in existing research. First, this study provides empirical evidence that caregiving—particularly motherhood—is a central organizing structure of refugee integration, rather than a secondary or private dimension of settlement. While much of the existing literature emphasizes employment, language acquisition, and institutional access, the findings demonstrate that integration is experienced and managed through everyday caregiving responsibilities. Adult-arrival women's accounts show that raising children in unfamiliar institutional environments—navigating schools, healthcare systems, and social norms—constitutes one of the most demanding aspects of settlement. This study therefore contributes empirical support to arguments that integration must be understood through the lens of gendered care, showing that caregiving is not peripheral but foundational to how integration is practiced in daily life.

Second, the dissertation documents the empirical significance of intergenerational role reversal and youth-mediated integration processes. The findings show that young Karen women who arrived as children or adolescents play a critical role in enabling family settlement by acting as interpreters, institutional navigators, and decision-making intermediaries. These responsibilities arise from structural conditions—particularly language barriers and institutional complexity—rather than from individual family dynamics alone. By examining how young women balance educational demands with translation, caregiving, and bureaucratic responsibilities, the analysis highlights a form of integration work that remains largely absent from policy frameworks and underrepresented in empirical research. In doing so, it offers a more comprehensive account of how integration is sustained within refugee families.

Third, this study offers empirical insight into the intergenerational variation in how integration is experienced and evaluated. By comparing adult-arrival and youth-arrival participants, the findings demonstrate that integration is not a uniform process but is shaped by age at arrival, educational access, and family roles. Adult-arrival women tend to evaluate settlement in relation to family stability, children's progress, and incremental structural

achievements, often describing their own integration as ongoing or incomplete. In contrast, younger women more frequently define integration in terms of educational attainment, employment, emotional stability, and a sense of belonging. This comparative evidence contributes to the literature by showing that integration must be understood as a life-course process, in which meanings and experiences vary significantly across generations.

Fourth, this dissertation provides empirical evidence of alternative, refugee-defined indicators of successful settlement that extend beyond dominant institutional metrics. Participants consistently emphasized emotional security, cultural continuity, intergenerational support, and community belonging as key markers of integration. These findings challenge conventional measures that prioritize economic outcomes and language proficiency, demonstrating that such indicators fail to capture the relational and affective dimensions of settlement. By documenting these alternative understandings, this study contributes empirical grounding for rethinking how integration is evaluated in both academic research and policy contexts.

Taken together, these contributions demonstrate that refugee integration cannot be fully understood through individual or outcome-based frameworks alone. Instead, the empirical evidence presented in this study shows that integration is gendered, intergenerational, and relationally sustained, requiring greater attention to caregiving, family dynamics, and the everyday practices through which settlement is made possible.

8.7 Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of my study reveal a clear gap between how integration is defined in policy frameworks and how it is experienced and practiced within refugee families. While settlement systems prioritize measurable outcomes such as language acquisition, employment, and service use, these indicators do not capture the relational, gendered, and intergenerational processes through which integration is sustained. The empirical evidence presented in this dissertation points to several key implications for policy and practice.

First, integration indicators must be expanded beyond outcome-based measures to include relational and intergenerational dimensions. Participants did not primarily evaluate integration through employment or language proficiency alone. Instead, they emphasized family stability, emotional security, cultural continuity, and children's progress as central markers of successful settlement. For adult-arrival women, integration was closely tied to their children's futures and

long-term security, while younger women emphasized belonging, safety, and future-oriented stability. These findings suggest that current policy frameworks risk overlooking meaningful forms of integration by privileging narrow economic indicators. A broader approach that includes relational well-being and intergenerational outcomes would more accurately reflect settlement experiences.

Second, language and interpretation services must be strengthened to address intergenerational inequalities in settlement processes. Limited access to interpretation services places responsibility on children—particularly daughters—to mediate between their families and institutions. The findings show that young women routinely navigate schools, healthcare systems, and bureaucratic processes on behalf of their parents while managing their own educational transitions. This reflects a structural gap in service provision rather than a family-level issue. Expanding access to professional interpretation across key sectors would reduce the burden placed on youth and improve equitable access to services.

Third, settlement policies must become more gender-responsive by recognizing caregiving as a central condition shaping integration**.** Caregiving responsibilities significantly affects women's ability to participate in language training, employment, and settlement programs. For adult-arrival mothers, daily engagement with institutions is structured around raising children in unfamiliar systems, often under conditions of limited English proficiency. These responsibilities are not adequately accounted for in current policy models. Expanding childcare support, offering flexible program delivery, and recognizing caregiving as a core component of integration would enable more inclusive and effective service provision.

Fourth, policy frameworks must acknowledge and support youth as active contributors to integration**.** Young refugee women play a critical role in enabling family settlement through translation, institutional navigation, and emotional support. Despite this, settlement systems largely treat youth as dependents rather than contributors. The findings show that these responsibilities are sustained over time and form a key foundation of family adaptation. Policies should therefore include targeted supports for youth, such as mentorship programs, mental health services, and educational accommodations that recognize their additional responsibilities.

Fifth, greater institutional support should be directed toward community-based and faith-based organizations as key sites of integration. The findings demonstrate that community networks and religious institutions provide essential forms of support, including emotional care, social

connection, and cultural continuity. These spaces enable refugees to maintain their identities while adapting to new environments and often fill gaps in formal services. Recognizing and supporting these organizations as part of the broader settlement infrastructure would strengthen integration outcomes and enhance culturally responsive service delivery.

Finally, integration policies must adopt a more flexible and context-sensitive approach that reflects diverse settlement pathways. The study shows that integration varies significantly across generations, shaped by age at arrival, education, family roles, and migration history. Adult-arrival and youth-arrival women experience and interpret integration differently, with distinct challenges and expectations. A standardized model of integration cannot account for these differences. Policies must therefore move toward more adaptive approaches that recognize variation across life-course positions and provide long-term, context-specific support.

In sum, these implications call for a shift from individual, outcome-driven models of integration toward approaches that recognize care, interdependence, and intergenerational responsibility as central to settlement processes. Aligning policy and practice with these realities is essential for developing more equitable and effective integration frameworks.

8.8 Limitations

While this study provides a detailed analysis of the gendered and intergenerational dimensions of refugee integration, several limitations arise from its analytical focus and scope. First, the study prioritizes family-level and relational dimensions of integration, which limits engagement with broader institutional and policy processes. Although the analysis highlights how participants navigate schools, healthcare systems, and settlement services, it does not systematically examine how these systems are designed, implemented, or experienced from the perspective of service providers and policymakers. As a result, the study offers stronger insight into how integration is practiced within families than into how institutional structures shape these processes at a systemic level.

Second, the study focuses on women’s experiences within family contexts, which limits attention to other forms of settlement experience. The analysis centers on participants who are actively engaged in caregiving and intergenerational family relationships. While this focus is central to the study’s contribution, it does not capture how integration may unfold for individuals who are not embedded in family structures or who navigate settlement in more independent or

socially isolated ways. These different social positions may shape integration in ways that are not addressed in this study.

Third, the study foregrounds caregiving, relationality, and cultural continuity, which may underrepresent other dimensions of integration. By centering everyday practices of care and intergenerational responsibility, the analysis gives less attention to other areas such as political participation, transnational engagement, or broader forms of civic integration. This reflects the study's conceptual focus but also narrows the range of integration processes examined.

Fourth, the conceptual framework developed in this study is grounded in a specific cultural and community context. The analysis draws on the experiences of Karen refugee women whose settlement trajectories are shaped by shared histories of displacement, strong community networks, and culturally embedded caregiving practices. While the findings offer valuable insights, the conceptualization of relational, care-based integration may not fully reflect the dynamics of other refugee groups with different cultural, social, or institutional contexts.

Finally, the study captures integration as an evolving process but relies on cross-sectional data rather than longitudinal observation**.** Although participants reflect on different stages of settlement and provide insight into change over time, the research does not follow the same individuals across multiple periods. As a result, the analysis is based on retrospective and interpretive accounts rather than direct observation of how integration unfolds over time.

These limitations clarify the study's scope while highlighting areas for further inquiry. They underscore the need for future research that incorporates multiple perspectives, broader institutional analysis, and longitudinal approaches to better understand the complexity of refugee integration across contexts.

8.9 Future Research

The findings and limitations of this study open several directions for future research that can deepen understanding of refugee integration as a gendered, intergenerational, and relational process. First, future research should more directly examine how institutional structures produce differentiated integration experiences across refugee populations. While this study highlights how Karen refugee women navigate settlement systems, further research is needed to investigate how institutional practices—such as language training models, service accessibility, and program design—shape uneven outcomes across groups. Comparative analyses across refugee communities

would provide a clearer understanding of how structural conditions reproduce or mitigate inequalities in integration processes.

Second, future research should expand the analysis of intergenerational dynamics beyond caregiving roles to examine how responsibility, authority, and decision-making are distributed within refugee families. This study demonstrates that young women assume significant responsibilities in mediating between families and institutions; however, further research could explore how these roles are negotiated within households, how they reshape family hierarchies, and how they influence identity formation, autonomy, and expectations across generations.

Third, future research should further develop the relationship between integration, citizenship, and diasporic belonging. The findings show that participants understand successful settlement not only through formal indicators but also through emotional security, cultural continuity, and a sense of home. These insights point to the need for research that examines how belonging is constructed beyond legal citizenship, particularly within diasporic communities where identity, attachment, and recognition are shaped by both homeland and host-society dynamics.

Finally, future research should place greater emphasis on refugees' own perspectives in shaping how integration is studied and understood. This study shows that refugee women actively interpret and define integration through their everyday experiences, family responsibilities, and cultural practices. Future research should build on this by paying closer attention to how refugees themselves understand belonging, success, and settlement, rather than relying solely on policy definitions or external frameworks. This would lead to more grounded and context-sensitive understandings of integration.

Building on these directions, one important avenue for future research would be to examine how legal and de facto forms of statelessness shape intergenerational integration and diasporic belonging. For example, this could include research on refugee communities from Myanmar, such as Rohingya populations who have experienced legal statelessness through the formal denial of citizenship (Human Rights Watch), and Karenni communities who experience forms of de facto statelessness due to prolonged displacement, conflict, and limited access to legal protection, official recognition, and basic rights (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization). By shifting attention from integration outcomes alone to the intersections of legal status in Canada and histories of displacement shaped by legal and de facto statelessness, such research could

extend the contributions of this dissertation and deepen understanding of how structural inequalities are experienced, negotiated, and reinterpreted across generations.

8.10 Final Reflection

This dissertation began with a concern that dominant approaches to refugee integration do not adequately capture the experiences of Karen refugee women in Canada. Across the chapters, that concern has been confirmed and deepened. The findings show that integration cannot be understood as a neutral, linear, or individualized process measured primarily through employment, language acquisition, or service use. Instead, for Karen refugee women in London, Ontario, integration is shaped by displacement histories, life-course position, caregiving responsibilities, institutional barriers, and intergenerational family dynamics. It is experienced not only through adaptation to a new society but through the ongoing work of sustaining family, negotiating cultural continuity, and creating stability under unequal conditions.

At the center of this study is the recognition that refugee women are not passive recipients of settlement services or marginal actors in integration processes. Adult-arrival mothers and youth-arrival women each demonstrate forms of agency that are deeply relational, culturally grounded, and shaped by structural constraint. For older women, settlement is carried through the labor of mothering, caregiving, and protecting family well-being in unfamiliar institutional contexts. For younger women, settlement involves not only education and adaptation but also translation, mediation, and the early assumption of responsibilities that enable family integration. What emerges across both generations is a picture of integration as work: emotional, cultural, linguistic, and intergenerational. Much of this labour remains invisible within dominant policy frameworks; it is precisely such work that sustains settlement in everyday life.

This dissertation has also shown that integration is interpreted differently across generations. Older women often understand it through family progress, citizenship, housing, and the future success of their children, while younger women more often describe it through education, belonging, emotional security, and the possibility of shaping a future in Canada. These differences are not contradictions. Rather, they reveal that integration is a life-course process whose meaning shifts according to women's responsibilities, social locations, and migration histories. This finding is important because it unsettles the idea that integration has one universal

meaning or endpoint. It shows instead that settlement is ongoing, uneven, and differently valued across generations.

The broader contribution of this study lies in its insistence that care, cultural continuity, and interdependence must be recognized as central to how integration unfolds. By developing the concepts of relational care-based integration and refugee epistemologies of integration, this dissertation argues that refugee women's own practices and understandings offer a necessary corrective to state-centric and outcome-driven models. Integration, in this sense, is not simply what institutions measure. It is also what refugee women practice, negotiate, and define through their daily efforts to sustain family life, preserve dignity, and create a sense of belonging across generations.

Ultimately, this dissertation calls for a shift in how refugee integration is theorized, studied, and supported. It asks that we take seriously the knowledge produced by refugee women themselves and recognize that the work of settlement often occurs in places that policy frameworks overlook: in homes, in acts of caregiving, in church communities, in translation between generations, and in the persistent effort to make a life in conditions not of one's own choosing. By centring the experiences of Karen refugee women, this study offers not only an empirical and theoretical contribution to refugee integration scholarship but also a more just and humane understanding of what it means to belong, to endure, and to build community after displacement.

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Appendix A

A Demographic and Background Questionnaire

Karen Refugee Women's Settlement Experience in London- Ontario

This interview document will be coded by pseudonym. Your real name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. You will be asked what "pseudonym" you would like to use at the end of the questionnaire and will use it on your interview's transcript.

YORK
UNIVERSITÉ
UNIVERSITY

Please make a tick mark the box which best describes your answer/s. Some questions can have more than one answer.

A. Participant's Background Information

1		How long have you been in Canada?
	□	5-10 years □16-20 years
	□	11-15 years □21 or more
2		What is your age range?
	□	25-34 □45-54
	□	35-44 □55-64
3		What is your religion?
	□	Buddhist □Christian (Baptist/ Protestant)
	□	Catholic □Islam
	□	Others (Please mention): _____
4		Did you live in another Canadian City before moving to London-Ontario? □ Yes □No If "Yes" please name, the City_____ Why did you decide to move to London? _____ _
5		What was your level of education before relocating to Canada?
6		Did you migrate to Canada with immediate family members (spouse, children, parents…etc)? If yes, please indicate.
7		Did you have any occupation before relocating to Canada? (If yes, please mention)
8		What is your current occupation? If your work involves "working from home" some days/every day, please indicate how.
9		Did you need to return to school in Canada to attain your current profession? If the answer is yes, then please provide details.

10		Is your work part-time (i.e., less than 40 hours per week) or full-time (i.e., 40 hours per week or more)?

B. Spouse-related questions.

11		How long has he been in Canada?
	□	5-10 years □16-20 years
	□	11-15 years □21 or more
12		What is his religion?
	□	Buddhist
	□	Catholic
	□	Christian (Baptist/ Protestant)
		Islam
	□	Others (Please mention): _____
13		Please describe his Myanmar ethnic origin (e.g., Kachin, Karen, Bamar, etc.) _____
14		Is he employed? □ Yes (please indicate his occupation: _____) □No □Fulltime □Part-Time □Self-Employed □Other (please indicate)_____

C. Children/ Family/ Gender Roles

15		How many children do you have, and how old are they?
16		Are you staying with any extended family members (e.g., parents, in-laws, relatives, etc.)? If yes, please specify your relation to them.
17		Which of the following categories describes the role/s of your husband in the family? **(Note: You can have more than one answer)**

		□Breadwinner □ Lord of the forefront of the house "Ein Oo Nat" □Family leader/ Decision maker □ Financial controller □50% caregiver to children □ Helper in parenting □Other (Please mention)_____
18		Are there any specific tasks your husband perceives himself as having to do because of his gender role as the "man of the house" (e.g., strenuous physical work, outside work, snow ploughing, lawn mowing, etc.)? If so, then please provide specific examples.
19		Are there any specific tasks that you perceive yourself as having to do because of your gender role as the "woman of the house"? If so, then please provide specific examples.
20		Can you describe some gendered Karen cultural traditions you **still follow** in Canada concerning your relationship with your husband?
21		Can you describe some gendered/cultural/ traditional responsibilities that you **stop** doing in Canada?

D. **Community Connection and Services**

22. What services did you access in London during the settlement process? Select all that apply.

□ Childcare □ Education □ Employment Services

□ Financial Services □Healthcare □ Housing

□ Language Training □ Legal Services □ Social Services

□ Recreation/Sports □ Settlement Services □ Public Transportation

□ **Others (please specify)** _____

23. What are the main barriers to accessing services (such as the services noted in the previous question) throughout London? Select all that apply.

□ Cost □ Program times/Schedule conflicts □ Eligibility

□ Requirements □ Transportation constraints □ Climate (e.g. snow/rain)

□ Health Concerns □ Childcare □ Discrimination

□ **N**ot knowing where to find services) □ Cultural Barriers

□Language/communication barriers

□ Other (please specify) _____

24. Are there services and support you or your family need, but can't find?

_____

_____

25. What are the biggest challenges you or your family have experienced in the last year in London? Select all that apply.

□ Learning English □ Finding work □ Upgrading education/credentials.

□Accessing public or social services (e.g. settlement services, government services, etc.)

□ Making friends or social connections □ Discrimination/ Racism

□ Mental health concerns □ Finding affordable housing □ Finding transportation.

□ Accessing health care □ Accessing relevant recreational programming (arts, culture, or sports)

□ Making sure my children are adjusting to school and life in the community.

□ Starting a new business. □ Accessing and using the Internet and digital technology.

□ Getting the information I need in a language I understand.

□ Other (please specify) _____

26. What services or supports do you think are needed to help newcomers thrive in your community? Select all that apply.

□ Support for families such as childcare, or programs for elderly family members

□ Improve language training courses.

□ **A**ccess to interpreters

□ Better referral systems amongst community agencies

□ Other (please specify)_____

27. How do you learn about community events, services, and programs?

□ Online (Websites and Email) □ social media

□ In-person/ through personal networks (friends, co-workers) □ Through service providers

□ Church □ Mail

□ Other (please specify) _____

28. Which of these options best describes your family's housing situation?

□ Home Ownership □ Rent

□ Other (please specify)_____

29. What is your favourite (settlement) service in Canada, and why?

30. What is your least disliked service in Canada (especially during the settlement process), and why?

31. When you came to Canada, could you speak and write English? When did you start learning English?

Thank you for your time! **Please leave a pseudonym you would like to use on your interview transcript** _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions (Part II)

Part II (interview questions) will take about 60-90 minutes and be structured around specific themes: stressors and coping strategies in the context of gender roles/responsibilities; family-related stressors; relocation (new place)- related stressors; and settlement service-related challenges.

(i) How old were you when you landed in Canada? What was the duration of your stay in a refugee camp before your relocation to Canada? Could you recall the names of the refugee camps you stayed in?

(ii) How do you describe your role/s and responsibilities during the forced migration process (in refugee camps and Canada)? Did you experience significant changes in your role (in the family) during the relocation and resettlement processes? Do you have any specific role/s and related responsibilities that give you the most trouble in the settlement process?

(iii) Can you please describe your mothering experiences in Canada? What are the challenges of motherhood in Canada? How did you manage your mothering with the issues of other responsibilities, such as employment, in the settlement process?

(iv) Describe your experience with settlement service agencies upon arrival in Canada. What are the biggest challenges you and your family have experienced during the settlement process? How do you overcome these challenges?

(v) What type of support do you expect from government agencies? Did you receive the support you needed, and from whom?

(vi) How do you identify "successful settlement" as a member of a refugee family from your perspective? Did you achieve it? Why do you say that?

(vii) How do you understand the concept of gender equality in your home in your relationship with your husband, and do you feel that you enjoy gender equality in your home (please answer why or why not)

(viii) Do you have any hopes, wishes, or worries about the future? Any other comments that you want to add (you think), which are not covered in the interview questions?

(ix) Did you apply any faith-based religious coping strategies to overcome your settlement challenges in London? If so, could you please provide a specific example you remember?

Appendix C

Disclosure

May-Kyawt, A. K. (2025). *Refugee motherhood and mothering: Adversities, resilience, and agency*. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative, 15*, 215–231.

May-Kyawt, A. K. (2026). *Invisible and indispensable: Intergenerational integration experiences of young Karen refugee women in Canada*. *International Journal of Education and Social Science, 13*(1), 38–47.

We approve the inclusion of the above publications in this dissertation.

Andrea o'Reilly, 03/06/26	*L. Visano*	
	02/06/2026	02/06/2026
Dr. Andrea O'Reilly	Dr. Livy Visano	Dr. Jay Goulding