



# PARENTAL AGENCY

IN FORCED MIGRATION



# ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The Mothers Matter Centre, in partnership with ISSofBC, and with funding from Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada, developed 'Reviving Hope and Home (RHH),' a program that is designed to ensure the well-being, dignity, and social connections of high-risk, vulnerable GAR mothers.

17 RHH refugee mothers from Syria and Iraq who have lived in Canada between 8 months to 3 years participated in this participatory research project which explored the potential loss of parental agency in forced migrant mothers.

The research focused on four phases: Before the war, during forced migration, on arrival to Canada, and after joining the HIPPY program.

Participants shared their stories through art, writing, and narrative which were recorded using three tools: digital art, audio and video.

The session was conducted fully in Arabic and was later transcribed, translated and analyzed by a team that included researchers, staff and Home Visitors.

**In social science, the term 'agency' refers to an individual's capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices.**

**In this research, we explore agency in the context of motherhood.**



# BEFORE

## THE WAR





When speaking about their homes in Syria, mothers described looking forward to a bright future for themselves and their kids. They pursued education and employment and wished for their kids to study in universities.

They were surrounded by a centralized, supportive family which played an important role in their lives. They felt stability and belonging within a society that encompassed their culture and religion.



Ghazeya

## BEFORE THE WAR

"I loved for my children to have a future in Syria."

"We were living happily before the war, [...] were  
were all together with our family."

"Our kids used to go to school safely, we used to be  
happy seeing them go and come."

"I didn't feel that I had a big responsibility because  
my family was around me."

# DURING

## FORCED MIGRATION





Mothers described the forced migration journey as one full of danger, horror and death. The unknown was terrifying as they were smuggled through mountains and into neighbouring borders.

Life was just as difficult within the transitioning countries. Mothers described unimaginable, inhumane conditions where they had no access to basic services. Many suffered from discrimination and felt very lonely and alienated.



## DURING FORCED MIGRATION

"It was horror, death at any minute [...] it was the road to the unknown."

"At night they would say there's an attack. I would cover my son and it was really terrifying and scary."

"They don't treat the Syrian the same, they discriminate."

"I struggled a lot [in the transition country] and I felt alienated."

# ON ARRIVAL

## TO CANADA





Mothers described a honeymoon stage upon arrival to Canada. They felt relieved, safe and hopeful about the possibilities that Canada has to offer.

As they settled, however, certain challenges became clear. Mothers sensed an increase in disrespect from their children and felt that they had to police their parenting otherwise they would lose their children either to authorities or to the society.

Language was emphasized as a key component to integration. Mothers described it as the gateway to breaking social isolation and a factor in healthy resettlement.



## ON ARRIVAL TO CANADA

**"I'm happy I came to Canada because my life changed completely. Canada gave me everything."**

**"The most important thing is the language [...]  
Learning a new language is very difficult."**

**"You can no longer control your child at all [...]  
He wants to make his own decisions based on his  
own will."**

# AFTER HIPPIY

## HOME INSTRUCTION FOR PARENTS





Mothers felt that the hippy program positively impacted them and their kids. Home visitors had a big impact on the family. They gave the mothers confidence, helped them break from social isolation, taught them parenting strategies and language skills.

Mothers also noticed a change in their children's critical and independent thinking skills, behavior, and mental health.

They felt that the program helped them learn and improve their english.

Overall, the mothers felt empowered by the program as it helped them teach their own kids and put them as the source of learning for their children.



## AFTER HIPPY CANADA

**"I wish for [HIPPY], my son waits for it."**

**"When the Home Visitor came into my life, she boosted my self confidence."**

**"I learned that I can teach him, that I can change my manner with him and he started to comply with me."**

**"We benefited a lot from the program."**





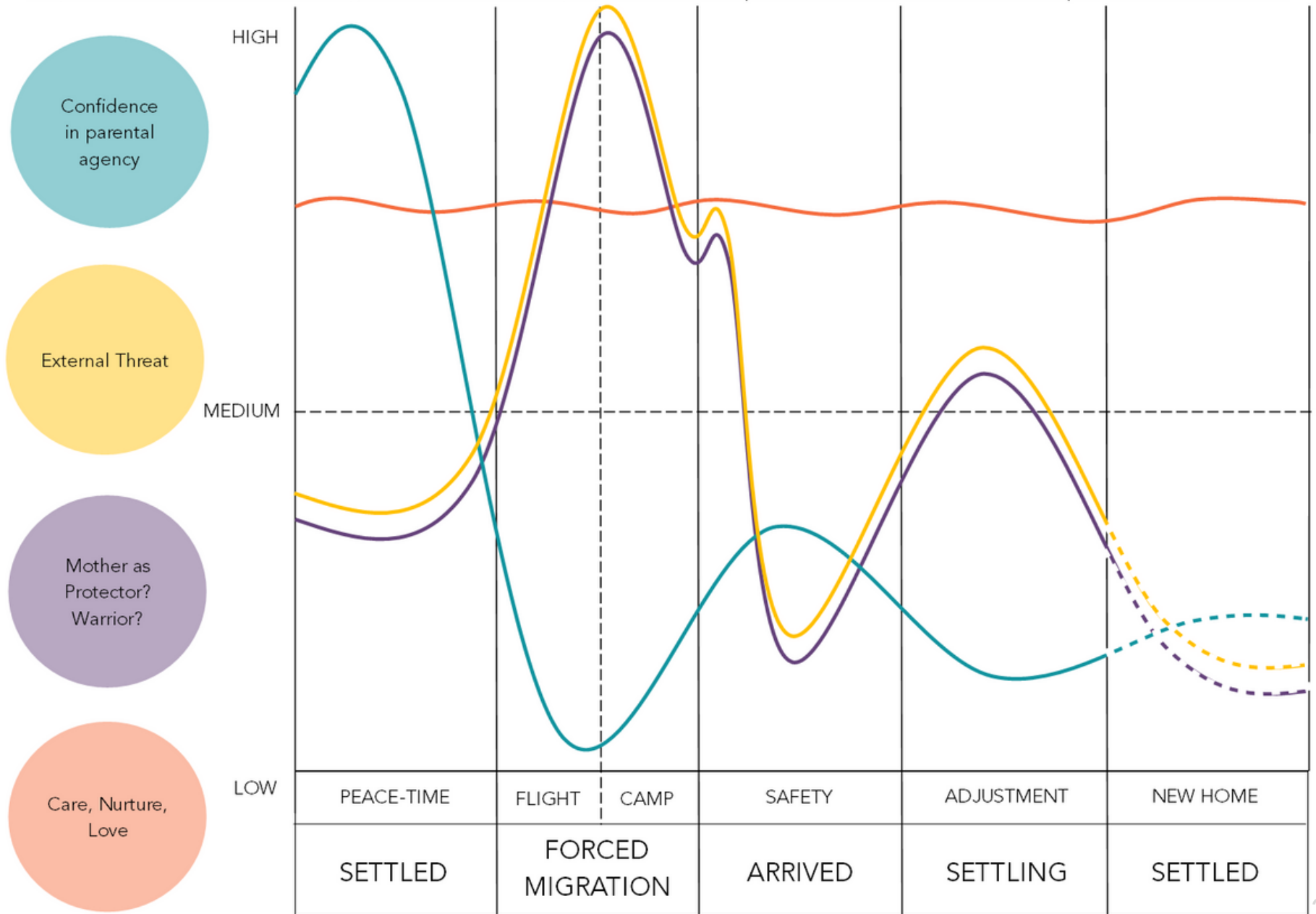
In preparation for this research, our original thesis was that there was a loss of parental agency as a result of the forced migration and resettlement processes.

However, during our discussion with the mothers in our research workshop, we understood that parental agency is actually multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and fluid. Different aspects of parental agency are impacted by external circumstances and factors.

# IMPRESSIONS OF PARENTAL AGENCY—FLUID AND MULTI FACETED

The capacity of individuals to act independently to make choices for themselves and their children.

Agency is nowhere more strongly realized than in flight, yet that's the point where their confidence as parents is the lowest



## FINDINGS

We've identified two components of parental agency through the workshop:

### **Mother's Confidence**

A mother's confidence in being a good parent is high in peacetime, but drops significantly during forced migration and starts to rise as she resettles.

### **Mothers as Protector/Warrior**

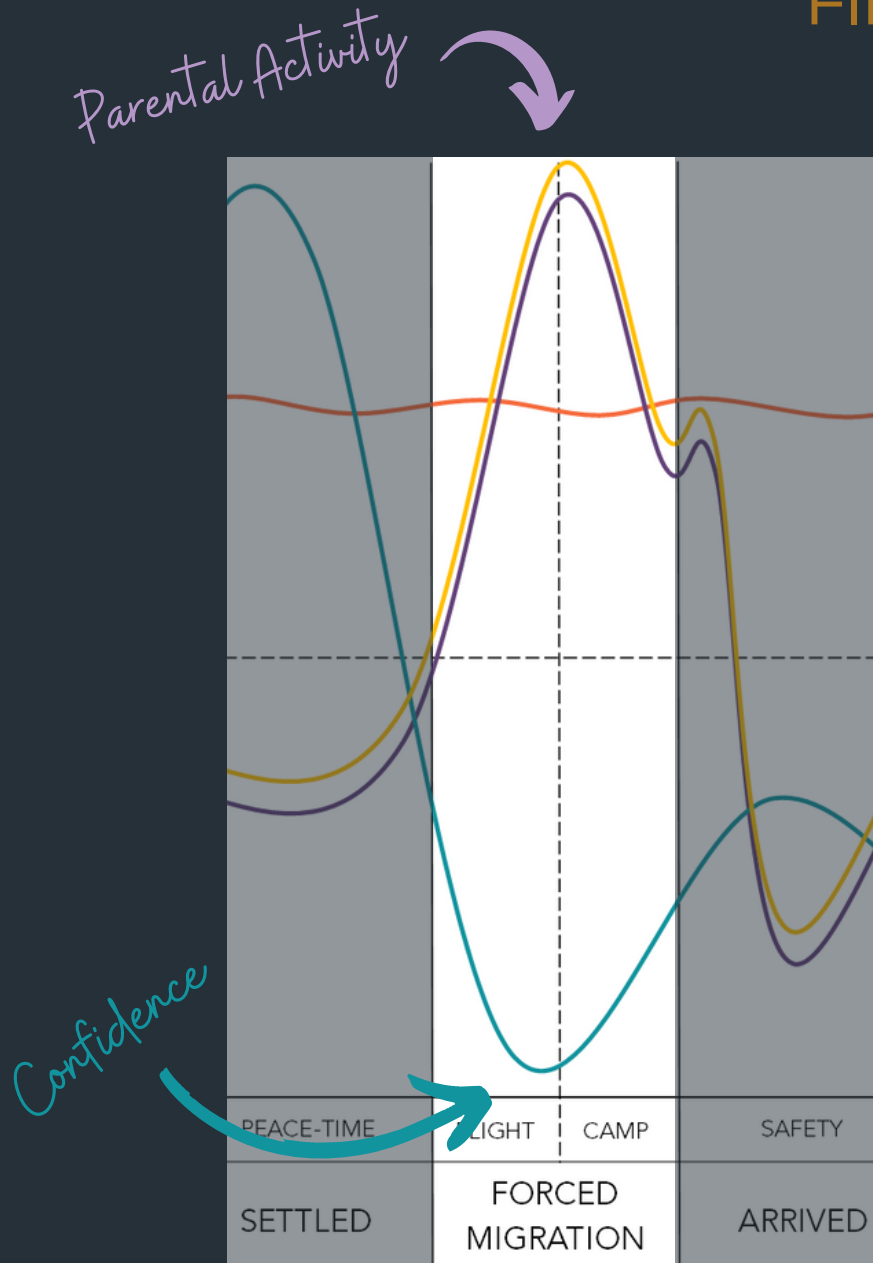
Due to living in a communal society, in times of peace, mothers felt that this component was shared with family and neighbors, yet during forced migration, it is extremely active. During resettlement it drops as security is regained yet drops again as mothers face the challenges of a new environment.



## منذ البدء في برنامج هيبى...

- اخبرينا عن قصة تحكي عن التغييرات التي حصلت في اساليب التربية لديك
- هل كانت هذه الاساليب جديدة بالنسبة لك؟
- هل كنت تمارسيتها في البيت؟
- كيف غيرت هذه الاساليب العلاقة بينك و بين ابنك؟
- هل هناك امور في حياتك تتمنى ان تتغير لتكوني مربية افضل؟

## FINDINGS



This section is what our research found incredibly intriguing.

During the period of heightened parental activity, mothers felt the least confident in themselves as parents.

It is a testament to our need to recognize, honour and respect the tremendous courage and demonstration of parental agency that persisted in spite of the inhumane conditions that the mothers faced through the forced migration journey.

# BEFORE MIGRATION:



A VILLAGE full of LOVE.

Family GATHERING regularly & to CELEBRATE



Day to Day LIFE?

PRIDE?

DREAMS?

lots of HELP...

Someone is ALWAYS there

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY



FRIENDS & family ALL around us.

SUPPORT from family & FRIENDS

Happy to see our family THRIVING

a Community for my CHILDREN.



a home!

a BRIGHT future.

STUDIES & UNIVERSITY.



Healthy life



WE LEFT BECAUSE WE WERE AFRAID for our CHILDREN

JUGGLING STUDYING + SURVIVAL + CARING for our KIDS

# DURING MIGRATION

CONSTANTLY MOVING

No CERTAINTY



NO CONSISTENCY or ACCESS to:

- schools
- Health
- INFORMATION

DANGERS from:

SNAKES

AUTHORITY

WILDERNESS

DISCRIMINATION TOWARDS REFUGEES

SLEEP IN CYCLES TO PROTECT the CHILDREN

the UNKNOWN is so SCARY

life WAS BLACK

I COULDN'T SEE any HOPE.

themes: SAFETY & DREAMS

# ON ARRIVAL



LIVING in fear THAT AN AUTHORITY WOULD take my CHILD.

a honeymoon phase

WE Came with NOTHING

- Toys
- clothes
- LANGUAGE

no LANGUAGE = LONELY.

i COULDN'T Communicate WITH other PARENTS & families

you Feel you CAN'T BE OPEN.

KIDS CATCH UP faster than we CAN.

LANGUAGE CLASSES require LITERACY in FIRST LANGUAGE.

# Part of HIPPY

ACCESS to ENGLISH →

is feeling MORE OUT GOING

is MAKING FRIENDS

it HELPS them to EXPRESS themselves

& THINK INDEPENDENTLY



Challenges of NAVIGATING Day-to-day:

- Rent
- Schools
- TRANSIT
- BANKING
- MEDICAL

the CULTURE HERE means they do NOT LISTEN

Difficult for TEENAGERS to ADJUST.

FEAR around the TRANSITION to TEENAGERS

without family SUPPORT.

Optimism  
Relief & HOPE



My Home visitors Helped my CHILD to LISTEN

GAVE ME CONFIDENCE & SELF-ESTEEM

- i'm LEARNING
- ✓ Great STRATEGIES
  - ✓ NEW VOCABULARY
  - ✓ TOOLS for PATIENCE
  - ✓ ENGLISH LANGUAGE

WE ARE IMPROVING together



the BEST & MOST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM for me SINCE i Arrived



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All the brave mothers who generously  
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