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Insights from Refugee Men as They Navigate Intersecting Settlement Challenges and Renegotiate Gender Identities

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ABSTRACT

Many refugee men have experienced significant trauma and face complex, interconnected challenges when settling into a new country. While the men require immediate assistance to meet their daily needs, such as securing housing and employment, in the longer term, they need support to build their confidence to navigate their new lives. Refugee men must negotiate unfamiliar social norms and learn “how to be a man” in their new home. Framed by intersectionality, the author examined the experiences of participants from an Australian refugee men’s social group to consider the challenges they faced and how these experiences overlapped with acculturation processes, such as renegotiating gender roles. Although the men’s group was not openly identified as a Domestic and Family Violence (DFV) prevention program, it embraced behaviour change strategies to develop trusting relationships within the group that encouraged conversations around gender norms to promote gender equality and family safety.

IMPLICATIONS

- Understanding refugee men’s challenges and lived experiences can inform social work responses to meet their immediate and long-term needs.
- Listening deeply to refugee men’s accounts of acculturation and perceptions of gender-based violence can better inform social work practice to codesign programs that foster gender equality and women’s safety in diverse communities.
- Talking to refugee men about conceptions of masculinity reveals the contested and plural nature of renegotiated gender roles and reinforces the value of applying intersectional frameworks in social work practice.

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Communities are increasingly speaking out to denounce gender-based violence (March4Justice, 2024). Designing effective responses for violence prevention must be informed by best practice that engages meaningfully with relevant research and evolves according to participant and service needs to bridge the gap between research

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and practice (Cabassa, 2016). This article shares findings from a study with an innovative refugee men's social group in regional New South Wales (NSW), Australia. Based on these learnings, human service practitioners are encouraged to look beyond material settlement needs to consider broader intersecting cultural challenges, such as navigating new gender norms, to understand their impact on relationships and family safety.

The men's group was established in response to the recommendations of an earlier study phase conducted by the author that captured refugee women's observations about violence in their communities and suggested ways to combat these issues. A recurring theme from the earlier research was that refugee men struggled with acculturation, especially the changes associated with renegotiating their gender identity. Participants in the earlier study commented that the men did not know "how to be a man in Australia" and required a safe space to disclose their challenges and seek support. The author unpacks the complex and contested nature of what it means to be a refugee man in Australia to consider how this conceptualisation connects to understandings around gender-based violence and its prevention. The research sought to consider the question "How can insights from refugee men about settlement challenges, including acculturation and navigating new gender norms, inform efforts to reduce domestic and family violence in their communities?" The study explored how acculturation processes are linked to increased challenges, stress, mental health concerns, and potential conflict, and how supporting refugee men to come together in a safe space allows for conversations, understandings, and actions that may, in the long term, reduce family violence.

This study, conducted in 2023, represents the final phase of an eight-year partnership between university researchers and a not-for-profit organisation. Findings from the other phases of research are published elsewhere (see Hughes, 2021; Hughes et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2023; Hughes & Whitaker, 2024; Whitaker et al., 2018; Whitaker et al., 2021). The author undertook this study phase after receiving an invitation from the not-for-profit organisation to document insights from their refugee men's social group, including how group members linked their settlement experiences to their conceptualisations of gender norms and how this, in turn, can impact gender-based violence.

The not-for-profit partner had worked in humanitarian settlement for many years and ran a program for women from refugee and migrant backgrounds that prioritised women's empowerment to better their lives postsettlement. The Australian Government funded the women's program in support of the National Action Plan to End Violence against Women and their Children (2012) and subsequent Plans (Australian Government, n.d.) as part of their efforts to reduce and prevent domestic and family violence. Consequently, based on a recommendation from research with the women, a men's group was established to augment the women's program by working with men to improve physical and mental health, reduce social isolation, and create safe and happy relationships. The men's group formed the research site for this study.

The research occurred in regional New South Wales, Australia, where more than 2,000 refugees have settled since 2004 (Department of Home Affairs, 2023). There are more than 40 countries of origin for these new arrivals, with the largest populations from Myanmar, Iraq, Syria, Congo, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (ABS, 2021). There is significant cultural diversity among refugee arrivals in the area, and they have distinct needs, skills, and aspirations.

Since commencing in 2021, the men's social group has supported over 80 men from most of the above-identified countries. The weekly group is designed by the men for the

men to encourage community-led responses to meet the specific needs of individuals. Attendance is voluntary; typically, five to eight men come to the group simultaneously. The group is intentionally small, allowing trust to develop and sensitive topics to be explored. The men play table tennis, cards, and darts, and participate in cultural activities. The group facilitator and guests support the men, who support each other in improving their English skills and utilising each other's social capital to access networks to gain employment. Interpreters are provided for men who prefer communicating in their first language; however, bicultural workers are not utilised because the group includes men from many different cultural backgrounds. A core intention of the group is to build trusting relationships to promote positive attitudes that will support good mental health and ultimately encourage gender equality and family safety.

Refugee Men's Challenges

There are many pressures on refugee men as they settle into a new country. Intersecting factors include premigration trauma (Kaplan, 2018), postmigration stress, and everyday financial pressures (Satyen et al., 2022), as well as changes to gender-based power dynamics (Ajlan, 2022; Jorgenson & Nilsson, 2021). Many of these factors, especially trauma and ongoing psychological distress (Satyen et al., 2022), can compound the incidence of violence in refugee families. For refugee men, these challenges can potentially heighten the incidence of controlling and violent behaviours that can impact women's and children's safety (Kuyini & Kivunja, 2020; Zielinski et al., 2024).

Acculturation and Gender Roles

Adjusting to new gender roles is challenging for refugee communities (Fernandez & Athukorala, 2024; Lemma et al., 2024; Ugurel Kamisli, 2021; Yalim & Critelli, 2023) who bear the responsibility of overcoming trauma to continue traditions, reinvent their identities, and adopt new roles in their new home. Refugee men must renegotiate gender roles as part of the acculturation process (Forget et al., 2019). However, Huizinga and van Hoven (2021, p. 1152) noted that "re-defining manhood after forced migration is not a linear process as it is subject to the specificities and uncertainties embedded in one's personal biography as well as the social and physical context of an often restrictive host society". Acculturation is complex and needs to be understood in the context of multi-layered intersecting identities (Jorgenson & Nilsson, 2021). Acculturation can add to the settlement burden, cause extra stress and confusion, negatively impact mental health (Jorgenson & Nilsson, 2021), and potentially worsen experiences of conflict and violence (Ikafa et al., 2022).

Timshel et al. (2017), in their systematic review of risk and protective factors for violence within refugee families, found that multiple studies have documented how the perceived breakdown of traditional values and practices, including gender role changes, has exacerbated incidents of violence in their communities. While recognising that violence is present in all cultures, and culture in itself does not cause violence, entrenched beliefs about patriarchal gender roles and distribution of power can contribute to conflict (Brotherhood of St Lawrence, 2015; Vaughan et al., 2016). However, beliefs are not necessarily tied to specific cultures, and they can be interpreted differently on an

individual level (El-Murr, 2018), which suggests there is potential to reinterpret deeply held beliefs about gender roles. Although acculturation can change attitudes about whether violence is acceptable, research indicates that it takes longer for men to change attitudes towards gender roles than women (Afrouz et al., 2021).

Contradictory Perceptions of Masculinity

Masculinity is defined as “behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with men, thus culturally defined as not feminine” (Whitehead & Barret, 2004, pp. 15–16). However, there are multiple versions of masculinity operating in any one culture, with hegemonic versions of masculinity being attributed higher status (Connell, 1995). Refugee men, like refugee women, navigate a range of socially constructed expectations. Refugee identities are already multilayered, and heterogenous and gendered ideals and representations add another level of complexity that needs to be problematised (Crawley, 2022; Olivius, 2016; Vaughan et al., 2019). There is no single version of being a “refugee man” or a “refugee woman”; yet refugee women often are constructed as powerless and vulnerable (Crawley, 2022), and refugee men are conversely represented as perpetrators of violence, gatekeepers of decision making, or as emasculated and disempowered (Olivius, 2016; Turner, 2021; Yalim & Critelli, 2023). Crawley (2022, p. 373) notes these representations are deeply racialised, and refugee men can be aligned with “dangerous masculinities” such as rapists or terrorists.

Forced displacement calls for the renegotiation of gendered identities. Even though culture remains an essential element of constructing new lives, culture is only one factor influencing behaviour and identity (Debbonaire, 2015). Refugee men must enact new masculinities that are historically and geographically specific. Understanding newly enacted masculinities includes recognition of the crossover between work, class, and gender (Huizinga & van Hoven, 2021), and this is particularly relevant for refugee-background men whose employment status influences perceptions of masculinity. Salter (2016, p. 13) notes “the intersectionality of masculinity with other social axes, such as those of class, racialized status or sexuality ... produces the expanded terrain of masculinities”. Applying an intersectional framework (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991) that recognises the interaction of culture, gender, age, and other forms of social stratification is necessary to understand the complex challenges refugee men face, including navigating inequality and entrenched power structures.

Methodology

Methodological Framework

The multiple phases of the above-noted long-term research project aimed to promote cross-cultural understanding and embrace empowered community collaboration. Informed by social constructivism, the research explored the “interactional constitution of lived realities within discernible contexts of social interaction” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 341). A qualitative research methodology was applied to enable deep engagement with participants, prioritising their lived experiences and acknowledging them as experts on their own lives (Frechette et al., 2020; Lincoln, 2005). Collaborative, action research (Coghlan & Brydon-

Miller, 2014; Mertler, 2017) was used throughout the research phases due to its appropriateness when working with refugee-background communities to counter power imbalances and provide reciprocal benefits (Doná, 2007; Hughes et al., 2023).

Sample and Recruitment

The researcher collaborated with the group facilitator to identify study participants. Potential participants were given an information sheet about the study, which was interpreted into the first languages as required. Five participants consented to be part of the study. The men came from Iraq, Syria, and Ethiopia, had lived in Australia from three to six years, and their ages ranged from 36 to 65 years. Most men were employed, although one was unemployed. Although the small sample size could be considered a limitation of the study, it is appropriate in this context as the research had a narrow focus and elicited rich data (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Data Collection

The researcher asked the men if they would like to participate in individual interviews. However, they preferred an in-depth group interview over two hours during “group” time and included the group facilitator. The group facilitator had built trust with the men over several years, and they requested his participation to establish a safe research environment where they felt comfortable sharing their experiences. Participants could respond to questions in English or use an interpreter. One man chose to answer in his first language with an interpreter. The questions addressed challenges experienced by men and what support they needed. Sample questions included do you think gaining skills or information has helped you have better relationships with your partner or family? Does your family like you going to Men’s Group? Why? And has Men’s Group helped you understand about being a man in Australia? The last question presented an opportunity to discuss the different forms of masculinity in Australia. Participants were not explicitly asked questions about gender-based violence, but they chose to discuss this in the context of navigating new gender roles, and the strong presence of gender-based violence in Australia was acknowledged. The researcher interviewed the group facilitator to document his observations, which had developed over several years of working with the group. These insights were informed by extensive experience supporting refugee communities and working in men’s behaviour change.

Data Analysis

The author used inductive thematic analysis to interpret the data to enhance understanding of lived experiences (Berg, 2009; Perakyla, 2005). To be fully immersed in the data to deepen understanding, the author transcribed the interviews verbatim and manually colour-coded the transcripts to identify commonly occurring themes through key quotes. Transcripts were reread to confirm themes, and the findings are presented according to these themes.

Ethics

A steering committee, domestic and family violence specialists, and health and other refugee-serving agencies guided the long-term research project throughout the different phases. Research with refugee-background communities requires special ethical consideration (Block et al., 2013), and efforts to avoid retraumatisation must be paramount. The author designed a research safety plan to refer participants to appropriate, specialised trauma-informed care if needed. The university ethics committee approved the study: approval no. 2022/141.

Findings

The findings underline the importance of understanding the multilayered experiences of refugee men as they navigate settlement, renegotiate identities, and create safe and secure livelihoods for themselves and their families. Key themes identified were: intersecting challenges: work and housing; navigating acculturation; the impact of trauma; and renegotiating gender norms to build a foundation to prevent violence.

Intersecting Challenges: Work and Housing

The research participants discussed difficulties living in nonmetropolitan Australia, including housing and employment issues. Participant 1 commented: “we live here now for five years ... people find jobs cleaning, you have a job, but the majority of jobs are cleaning. It’s not an easy job for some people”. Another man stated:

I was a teacher in my country. For 15 years, I taught geography and history, I have a degree from university, but here I am looking for jobs in a library or school. I wrote to every school here but no. (Participant 3)

Housing remains a significant issue for refugee-background communities. One man said:

The cost of living is very high. Finding housing. Housing is becoming a very big issue ... Most of them have been applying for housing for almost six months ... Sometimes, our people used to worry about a job, but now we have enough jobs, and housing is the main issue. (Participant 5)

Navigating Acculturation

Acculturation presents challenges for people from refugee backgrounds, and the men emphasised their struggles in learning about “Australian ways of doing things”. Participant 2 said: “We came to this country with a different culture. When we came, we had orientation ... culture was something we needed to learn because it’s a very important part of our life. We have to learn about the culture ...”

Participants spoke of the adjustment required around gender roles. One man discussed his reservations about his daughter’s changing freedoms:

I want my daughter to be like my culture and not change to this culture. Maybe the clothes are different. I like my daughter to wear, not exactly like my Mum, it’s changed a little bit, but it’s very difficult not just for me but my whole community. But I don’t know what will

happen ... If she's 18, I can't ask my daughter why she's wearing these shorts or skirt or dress, but in my country, parents don't allow their daughter to wear this. They keep their daughter at home because the culture is different. Not like Australia, [at home] all the neighbours know each other. If the daughter [is] doing something bad, we all know. All the family, all the relatives. Lots of changing in Australia. (Participant 1)

Another man commented on negotiating new gender norms, but showed his support for some aspects of his new home:

Between Syria and Australia, it's very different. In Syria, the women can't do anything without telling their husbands. And the husband needs to agree, and if they don't agree, they can't do it. I think there is more freedom for women in Australia than in my country. I'm happy in Australia because the freedom is better. (Participant 3)

The Impact of Trauma

The group facilitator commented that although the participants face many difficulties when settling into their new life, their experiences of trauma outweigh the practical challenges they encounter:

With some of these men, the trauma is so acute that they can't even learn English; they're just unable to focus and concentrate on something for long enough to beat it ... that's the biggest barrier and the biggest obstacle in working with the men ... [participant's name] is an intelligent man, and he's had important positions in the community ... But because of this trauma, he's been unable to learn English.

Experiences of trauma can hinder any efforts to acquire new skills and navigate acculturation. The facilitator commented that trauma can prevent the men from being better equipped to navigate opportunities such as securing preferred work and housing. This, in turn, can lead to feelings of emasculation and can potentially worsen experiences of domestic and family violence.

Renegotiating Gender Norms to Build a Foundation to Prevent Violence

The men's families were supportive of group attendance. Participant 2 said: "My family are pleased to know there is someone to help us in this country. My wife, when I go home, I tell her everything in men's group—she is very happy about that." Participant 4 added: "Just like the men are happy for the women to go to women's group, the women are happy for the men to go to men's group. We have the men's group because the women said we needed it."

As the men in the group navigated material challenges and built their confidence and connections, they reconsidered gender norms as they negotiated "what it means to be a man in Australia" in all its multiplicities. The group facilitator commented that this development could support the group's long-term aim to prevent domestic and family violence by changing attitudes and behaviour:

We're funded to do domestic violence prevention by getting that counselling work done and having that discussion ... we regularly discuss gender equality and how it's different for different cultures and men and women in some countries. We talk about daughters and what the men want for their daughters and, by extension, their partners and mothers and what they wish could be different for their mothers.

Group members commented on their newly negotiated gender norms:

In Australia, you're not allowed to be violent. I don't like to hit children, but in my country, it's free. No one can ask you anything. Me and my wife, if something happened between us in [country of origin], no police ... [are] coming, just a relative to help the wife to come back again. But the rule of Australia is very different. (Participant 1)

Learning the ways of a new country can be confronting, but the men agreed that though these changes take some cultural adjustment, they can see the benefits to personal, family, and community safety. Participant 3 responded: "We're happy. Yes, it's better in Australia. Not anyone can hit his wife, and no one can hit their husband. It's a very good thing."

Despite the complexity of the challenges, the men discussed success stories, including practical outcomes such as attaining driver licences, gaining employment, and reducing dependency on alcohol. Participant 5 commented: "We have some men that were involved in activities like drinking. But when they joined the group, they stopped drinking and that must have ... [had] a very good impact on their family. That's very good." Identifying and responding to the men's practical needs, such as housing and employment, produced positive outcomes that reduced feelings of disempowerment, and could prevent violence and enhance family safety.

Discussion

The research sought to consider the question "How can insights from refugee men about settlement challenges, including acculturation and navigating new gender norms, inform efforts to reduce domestic and family violence in their communities?" The study found that challenges such as unemployment can impact refugee men's feelings about masculinity. Further it found that navigating acculturation can be confusing and stressful but ultimately lead to newly enacted gender norms that encourage equality and reduce gender-based violence. These findings highlighted the value of applying an intersectional framework (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991) to better understand the complex, multilayered nature of refugee-settlement challenges that are deeply linked to social identity and status. Support workers must go beyond essentialised understandings of refugee experiences to listen deeply and offer individualised support. It is important to understand that "social and relational dynamics are shaped by the context and forced migration experience" (Yalim & Critelli, 2023, p. 2) and impact attitudes toward gender-based violence.

The refugee-background men in the study faced multilayered challenges including securing housing and employment. They did not choose to come to Australia; they were forced migrants who had their asylum claims processed offshore. In most cases, they knew nothing about Australian cultural norms, but navigating these expectations added a burden to their new lives. As they reinvented their identities in Australia, they renegotiated their masculinity/ies. Huizinga and van Hoven (2021, p. 1169) noted that "masculinities are constructed in relation to the disruptive events of war, the specific economic and institutional opportunities and challenges of the host society, and the norms, traditions and expectations interlaced with the respondents' personal biographies". Study participants have been subjected to dominant constructions of refugee manhood—powerless and vulnerable (Crawley, 2022), perpetrators of violence, or

emasculated and disempowered (Olivius, 2016; Turner, 2021). They have been exposed to hegemonic notions of Australian masculinity that perpetuate violence (Salter, 2016)—all while learning “how to be a man in Australia”. By applying an intersectional framework (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991), these limited gender representations can be problematised to better understand the plurality of refugee men’s lives and better serve their needs. Though there are legitimate concerns about the tokenistic application of intersectionality (Maturi & Munro, 2023), meaningful integration of this approach in social work can challenge the structural inequalities and discrimination inherent in contemporary Australia (Colvin, 2017; Ziersch et al., 2020) and provide more profound understanding of refugee men’s multilayered identities and experiences.

Refugee men want education about gender norms and, more specifically, domestic and family violence (Ajlan, 2022; Brotherhood of St Lawrence, 2015; Zielinski et al., 2024). Olivius (2016, p. 62) claimed that “enlisting men as allies is therefore crucial if gender equality reforms are to succeed”. In this study, the men demonstrated an eagerness to learn about social norms, and this contributed to developing new identities as multicultural men in Australia. Connell contends that “[m]en and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality. Whether they are willing to open the gates for major reform is an important strategic question” (2005, p. 1802).

Addressing patriarchal norms through group discussion, in this case, led to denormalising domestic and family violence (Afrouz et al., 2021). As the men deepened their connection to each other, their confidence improved, which led to positive feelings of empowerment. While respecting diverse cultural identities and traditions, the group discussions encouraged the men to “challenge traditional notions of unequal power relations and deconstruct and reconstruct their notions of masculinity” (Satyen et al., 2022, p. 10). Program success could be measured through long-term attitudinal changes to gender roles and family relationships, which in turn could lead to self-driven violence prevention.

In this study, the key to success is highlighted in discussions with the men about migration-related challenges that impact broader issues like gender equality and violence prevention. In this instance, the men showed they were willing to engage in “culturally sensitive discussions about gender, power, and violence” (Satyen et al., 2022, p. 4). These discussions could foster nonviolent behaviour. Findings from this study suggested that programs explicitly identified as “behaviour change” or “domestic and family violence” focused might not be as successful as those responding first to immediate community needs. This could involve supporting participants to secure employment or education, and then, in a more relaxed social environment, once trust has been established, tackling sensitive subjects like gender-based violence.

Limitations of the Study

The study captured insights from a small, culturally diverse group of men from refugee backgrounds in a regional Australian city. Participants’ experiences, therefore, cannot necessarily be applied to larger groups of refugee men in other locations, and the narratives shared represent particular experiences at a specific place and moment in time. The participants’ long-term group attendance enhances the data’s trustworthiness. Although some men have left the group due to work commitments, those who continue to attend

have built strong bonds with each other, have a deep understanding of the issues facing group members, and have reflected on their own challenges and concerns in this supportive environment. The facilitator's presence may have influenced the men to provide positive responses. However, this study makes no claims of objectivity as it is interested in disseminating participants' narratives in their unique social contexts. Additionally, the men may not have felt safe sharing these insights without the facilitator's presence. Future research should explore refugee men's experiences in other geographic areas and within the same cultural groups to identify differences and commonalities to strengthen support mechanisms for this cohort.

Conclusion

The study aimed to enrich social work's understanding of the complexity of how refugee men navigate masculinities in their new country. Successful support should be underpinned by an intersectional and trauma-informed approach acknowledging different factors contributing to refugee men's identities, social status, and their conceptualisation of masculinity/ies. Applying an intersectional approach assists in avoiding paternalistic responses to refugee men that promote limited constructions of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, social equality and justice should be prioritised in all gender-based programs (Olivius, 2016). This commitment is crucial to responding to refugee men's settlement challenges and supporting long-term wellbeing and safety for themselves and their families.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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