



“I Am a Princess Who Moves Around a Lot”: Syrian Refugee Women and the Shifting Roles and Responsibilities During Early Settlement in Southwestern Ontario

Rana Telfah^a

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a feminist approach to understanding Syrian refugee women's early settlement experiences in small southwestern Ontario communities. It draws on interviews with Syrian refugee women who arrived in Canada with their families, sometimes without husbands, in 2016–2019. It is argued that the refugee journey and resulting shifts in Syrian women's reproductive activities, including when they settle in rural/small-town southwestern Ontario, help them find a voice, giving them greater independence and power within their families. This study emphasizes the gendered nature of household production and contributes to literature on social reproduction by exploring the often-overlooked context of refugee resettlement. Findings highlight the necessity for policies that provide better support for refugee women during early settlement.

KEYWORDS

early settlement experiences; rural Ontario; social reproduction theory; Syrian refugee women; gendered household production

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article adopte une approche féministe afin de comprendre les premières expériences de réinstallation des réfugiées syriennes dans les petites communautés du sud-ouest de l'Ontario. Il s'appuie sur des entretiens avec des réfugiées syriennes qui sont arrivées au Canada avec leurs familles, parfois sans leurs maris, entre 2016 et 2019. Il soutient que le parcours des réfugiées et les changements qui en résultent des activités reproductives chez les femmes syriennes, y compris quand elles s'établissent dans les régions rurales et les petites villes du sud-ouest de l'Ontario, les aide à trouver leur voix, leur donnant ainsi plus d'indépendance et de pouvoir au sein de leur famille. Cette étude met l'emphase sur la nature genrée de la production domestique et contribue à la littérature en ce qui concerne la reproduction sociale au moyen d'une exploration du contexte de l'établissement des personnes réfugiées, souvent négligé. Les résultats soulignent la nécessité de mettre en place des politiques qui offrent un meilleur soutien aux femmes réfugiées lors de leur réinstallation initiale.

The Syrian revolution began in 2011 with civil society demonstrations against the ultimately overthrown Bashar al-Assad's government (Agrawal, 2019; Peterson, 2025; Tuzi, 2021). The civil war in Syria has had a profoundly detrimental effect on women and children, making them the most vulnerable group, with the majority of internally displaced individuals and refugees being

women and children (Asaf, 2017). Extensive literature has examined the dynamics of the Syrian family, encompassing women's family responsibilities, marriage, divorce, wealth distribution, and bride price (Mahr) (Adely & Hendrix, 2018; Chatty, 2018; Inhorn, 2018). A significant portion of this recent content adopts a feminist perspective while examining the Syrian family and strongly crit-

CONTACT

^a rtelfah@uoguelph.ca, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, Guelph, Canada

icizes Syrian society's patriarchal framework (Chatty, 2018, p. 234).

Numerous scholars have examined the private and public domains in the Arab region (Al-Krenawi & Jackson, 2014; Joseph, 1994, 1997). Joseph (1997) notes that patriarchal family relationships were prevalent in Middle Eastern countries, blurring the lines between the private and public spheres as patriarchal behaviour patterns were replicated in domestic and public arenas (p. 79). In an Arab family, the wife is expected to bear and nurture children and often promote religious practice and conservatism in her children (Al-Krenawi & Jackson, 2014). However, gender roles are dynamic; they do not operate rigidly across time and space, and political, economic, social, environmental, and ideological changes can transform the structures of gender operations (Abu-Assab, 2017; Nasser-Eddin, 2017).

Following the conflict, many Syrians sought refuge in neighbouring countries, and a smaller number migrated worldwide to countries including the United States, Australia, the European Union, and Canada (Ashbourne et al., 2021). However, leaving their home country significantly shifts gender dynamics within the household (Balaghi et al., 2017; Tuzi, 2021).

A considerable amount of literature has examined Syrian women and the difficulties they face in displacement (Abu-Assab, 2017; Alhayek, 2015; Asaf, 2017; Canefe, 2018; El-Masri et al., 2013; Haddad, 2014; Nasser-Eddin, 2017; Tuzi, 2021). Resettlement, adaptation, adjustment, and integration are different immigration practices that help immigrants integrate into their host nation (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2011). Refugee settlement and subsequent integration into the new communities are critical issues for governments, communities, and newcomers.

In 2019, Canada resettled 54,560 Syrian refugees (Bose, 2020). Each refugee's experience is unique as Canadian communities vary in how they welcome newcomers (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2011). Researchers have identified a crucial gap in the literature highlighting the experience of refugees settling into small communities. This underscores the need for further research to understand these communities and individuals' unique challenges (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2020; Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017). My research focused on the early settlement experiences of Syrian families in rural and small towns (RSTs) and census agglomeration communities (CAs) in southwestern Ontario.¹ This study is part of a broader project exploring the early settlement experiences of Syrian families in southwestern Ontario.

During the early stages of settlement, changes in social reproductive activities that began during the migratory journey continued in southwestern Ontario, impacting the settlement of Syrian families. I argue that the refugee journey and resulting shifts in Syrian women's reproductive activities, including during settlement in rural/small-town southwestern Ontario, help them find a voice that gives them greater independence and power within their families. Previous studies revealed changes in gender roles and responsibilities of Syrian families in different contexts, such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Gowayed, 2019; Habash & Omata, 2022; Tuzi, 2021; Utržan & Wieling, 2020). This research adds empirical results from the Canadian context, particularly in southwestern Ontario, and contributes to policy and scholarship, focusing on gender dynamics stemming from Syrian refugee

¹RSTs describe census subdivisions (CSDs) with a population of less than 10,000 (Statistics Canada, 2001). A census agglomeration (CA) refers to an urban centre with a population of 10,000 to 99,000. It includes neighbouring CSDs where 50% or more of the workers travel to the urban centre of the CA (Beshiri & He, 2009).

families' early settlement experiences in rural Ontario. This research links changes in gender roles and responsibilities with the social reproduction framework, focusing on particular dimensions of social reproduction work (i.e., activities inside the household such as cleaning, childcare, and activities outside the household), which provides fine-grained data specific to this group (Syrian refugee families) and in this place (rural southwestern Ontario). This level of detail is rare in the literature, impeding understanding of people's lives in the new context.

The current study aims to fill a significant gap in the existing body of research, given that most social reproduction scholarship has focused on immigrant and non-migrant households (Bakker, 2007; Finnermore, 2022; Fudge, 2014; LeBaron & Roberts, 2010; Shelton, 2006). There is a lack of focus on the same or similar household tasks for the refugee population in the resettlement context.

Neoliberalism is central in shaping policy directions and discursive outcomes that significantly affect immigrant families. This lens is invaluable for comprehending the complexities of immigrant integration (Root et al., 2014). Richmond and Shields (2004) emphasize the adverse effects of neoliberal restructuring on immigrant and refugee populations from a broader perspective. This broader influence has contributed to challenging labour market integration, poor economic outcomes overall, and decreased government support for settlement and integration for most immigrants and refugees, especially those racially stereotyped and even those with significant occupational resources (Root et al., 2014).

This research draws on interviews with Syrian refugee women who arrived in small communities in southwestern Ontario, Canada, with their families and sometimes without husbands between 2016 and 2019. A social

reproduction framework is used to highlight the marginalized voices of Syrian refugee women in the settlement process, and a feminist approach is taken to understanding their early settlement experiences. This article introduces refugee resettlement in the Canadian context and discusses rural migration and neoliberalism from a feminist perspective. It examines the neoliberal state, immigration and the restructuring of services in rural communities, and refugee resettlement in rural and small towns in Canada. Finally, it delves into the social reproduction framework, which is used to highlight the marginalized voices of women in the settlement process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Refugee Resettlement in the Canadian Context

Canada is a refugee-welcoming country. The Government of Canada admitted approximately 23,000 refugees per year from 2006 to 2015, although the numbers fluctuated widely from year to year (Agrawal, 2019, p. 942). The Syrian refugee crisis emerged as a prominent and defining factor in Canada's federal election in 2015 (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2020). Approximately 45,000 Syrian refugees have been admitted to Canada since then, surpassing the original goal (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2020, p. 654). Canada relies upon UNHCR's Refugee Status Determination unit to determine the status of individuals seeking international protection.

The determination process established by UNHCR for refugees and asylum seekers is well defined (see Agrawal, 2019). Canada, working with UNHCR, approved 26,240 as Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), 23,495 as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR), and 4,830 as Blended Visa Sponsorship Refugees (BVOR) (Bose, 2020) (for the differences

between sponsorship types, see [Agrawal, 2019](#); [Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017](#)). Priority was given to the most vulnerable refugees, such as families with severe health conditions and disabilities and single mothers with young children ([Hynie et al., 2019](#)).

Refugee resettlement is a voluntary government initiative aimed at protecting refugees and sharing global responsibilities ([Schneider, 2021](#)), involving selection, transportation, and integration of potential refugees. Traditional resettlement countries prioritize candidates based on national criteria and vulnerability factors, including education and employment experiences ([Walsh, 2011](#); [Westerby, 2020](#)).

For refugees, "gender affects every stage of the refugee journey, from reception to durable solutions" ([Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2018](#)). Refugees who leave their nation in a rush and unprepared frequently face disadvantages in host countries ([Shishehgar et al., 2017](#)). Feminist researchers have highlighted gender inequalities of displaced people during the migration journey and the paternalism of the humanitarian sector ([Barnett, 2016](#); [Freedman, 2008](#); [Holloway et al., 2019](#)). The literature review indicated that the majority of studies focused on individual-level settlement outcomes relevant to all newcomers ([Alberta Association of Immigrant Serving Agencies, 2017](#); [English et al., 2017](#); [Kwon & Lee, 2018](#); [Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017](#)). In contrast, fewer evaluations specifically assess the unique resettlement experiences of refugees ([Janzen et al., 2022](#)).

The Neoliberal State, Immigration, and the Restructuring of Services

A neoliberal order became entrenched in Canada between the mid-1990s and the first decade of the 21st century ([Luxton & Bezanson, 2006](#)). Neoliberalism involves policies that shift several roles from federal

and provincial governments to local governments, outsourcing most governmental services, frequently through "public-private partnerships," and reducing government expenditure ([Wood et al., 2012](#)). Instead of considering society as a whole and investing in common interests, these strategies are designed to rely on the individual and the market ([Wood et al., 2012](#)).

Gender-specific consequences emerge from the neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance. Due to budget cuts in welfare, health care, and education, women—who perform most of the private care in society—must work more at home to compensate for a lack of social resources ([Arat-Koc, 1999](#)). Neoliberal economic theory disregards the contribution of unpaid housework to the economy and devalues women's social reproductive labour, making it invisible and inconsequential ([Arat-Koc, 1999](#)). The federal government and multiple provinces have delegated responsibilities for important aspects of social reproduction to municipalities and individuals ([Luxton & Bezanson, 2006](#)). Provincial governments following neoliberal ideologies, particularly Ontario's Conservatives and British Columbia's Liberals, reformed their welfare systems. This shift led to individualizing social problems and their associated costs ([Luxton & Bezanson, 2006](#)).

As federal and provincial governments withdrew from their previous roles in social and income support and increased the power of the private market, social reproduction was unequally redistributed across the state-market-family/household-third sector nexus. By default and by design, families, particularly the women within them, picked up the work that was not provided publicly and not affordable personally. Gender, race, and class were central to the neoliberal project: As economic restructuring and privatization took hold, existing inequalities in income,

opportunities, citizenship, and support were exacerbated (Luxton & Bezanson, 2006). The redistribution of social reproduction across institutions throughout the neoliberal period results from destabilizing the prevailing gender, class, and/or race/ethnic hierarchies. According to Luxton and Bezanson (2006), the labour market has become increasingly unstable, especially for lower-income people. This broader influence has contributed to challenging labour market integration, poor economic outcomes overall, and decreased government support for settlement and integration for most immigrants and refugees, especially those racially stereotyped, even those with significant occupational resources (Root et al., 2014).

Neoliberalism influenced program design and policy-making in immigration, immigrant settlement, integration, and citizenship (See Bushell & Shields, 2018; Root et al., 2014; Shields et al., 2016). The new immigration laws seek to hold immigrants and their families responsible for their integration, reorganize welfare systems to cut back on services, and transfer settlement services to local governments and nonprofit organizations (Shields et al., 2016). However, local governments in Canada do not have authority over the settling of immigrants and refugees, and they cannot plan for or deliver settlement services despite being on the front lines of welcoming newcomers (Walton-Roberts et al., 2019).

Rural Migration and Neoliberalism from a Feminist Perspective

The following literature focuses on non-refugee women's experiences in rural areas. Rural areas in Canada present distinct challenges when attracting and retaining new residents. Feminist researchers argue that being in a rural community entails distinct socio-economic realities. For example,

residing in rural areas often requires traveling between communities to access places of worship, stores, medical professionals, childcare facilities, and employment (Winson & Leach, 2002). Sutherns et al. (2012) and Leipert et al. (2012) show that gender influences perceptions of rural settings and health. Overall health and well-being in these areas are affected by gender, class, ethnicity, and cultural background (Stiles et al., 2012). Views of masculinity and femininity shape rural communities in Canada, which influence family farming dynamics.

The social dynamics of family farming have given rise to conceptions regarding the responsibilities of women within the family and men in agricultural work, which in turn have influenced the organizational structure of rural institutions (Dadvar-Khani, 2015). According to Halseth and Ryser (2006), health care services were curtailed over time, and educational facilities have been reduced in number.

Researchers including Halseth and Ryser (2006), Leipert (2005), and Sutherns et al. (2012) demonstrate the detrimental effects of service cutbacks on women in rural communities. Rural women have experienced increased isolation and deprivation of essential services such as food banks, transportation, and legal aid due to service cuts (Leipert, 2005). Travelling from one's hometown to these and other services can be expensive and time-consuming, particularly if children need to accompany the caregiver or require care at home (Leipert, 2005). Rurality is a critical social barrier to women's well-being, and the higher costs of services, especially phone service and transportation, in these regions contribute to women's loneliness and are obstacles to services (Hornosty & Doherty, 2003). Insufficient funding for these services leads to increased stress levels among women because of inadequate care, overcrowding,

and delays (Leipert, 2005). It is in this rural context that many Syrian refugee families were resettled.

Refugee Resettlement in Rural and Small Towns in Canada

In Canada, most Syrian refugees arrived as large family units, resettled in urban areas, had limited formal education, and lacked proficiency in Canada's official languages. Many were women of childbearing age (Ahmed et al., 2017; Yohani et al., 2019). Various studies explored the settlement experiences of Syrian families, compared their experiences according to community size, and documented the differences among the three streams: GARs, PSRs, and BVORs (Drolet et al., 2017; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Foley et al., 2018; Oudshoorn et al., 2020; Agrawal & Zeitouny, 2017). Literature on Syrian refugees shows that they felt grateful for the safety of their community and the opportunity to rebuild their lives; however, their process of adapting was accompanied by numerous challenges (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2020; Ashbourne et al., 2021; Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Oudshoorn et al., 2020).

A review of the literature on settlement and integration by Agrawal and Sangapala (2020) reveals that the experiences of refugees in small communities are overlooked. Canadian immigration and settlement studies mainly focus on the country's three major cities: Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Agrawal & Sangapala, 2020; M. A. Lam, 2019). Haugen (2019), Agrawal and Sangapala (2020), Agrawal and Zeitouny (2017), Kandiah (2018), and Hellstrom (2018) provide insight into Syrian refugees' experiences in small, rural, and medium-sized cities. Sponsoring groups resettled most Syrian refugees in rural areas. In tight-knit rural communities, locals volunteer to help others (M. A. Lam, 2019). Haugen (2019) highlights the social

capital in rural areas in Canada. However, in rural communities, transportation is challenging for Syrian refugee families (Haugen, 2019). The local context where refugees settle is essential in their integration process. It is essential to recognize the diversity of Syrian backgrounds, geographical locations, education, and religious views and how these factors influenced their community relationships (Drolet et al., 2017). Further research is needed to explore the diverse experiences of refugees in urban and rural areas (Ghahari et al., 2020; M. A. Lam, 2019), as growing crises drive more Middle Eastern refugees to seek safety in Canada (Ghahari et al., 2020). Previous research by Renzaho et al. (2011), with a focus on Arabic refugee families in Australia, observed shifts in gender roles that empowered women and diminished the father's traditional disciplinarian role. This shift resulted in mothers assuming greater responsibilities inside and outside the home. Moreover, amongst South Sudanese refugees resettled in Australia, the management of family finances caused tension between couples (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). Because both wives and husbands were individually receiving government assistance as their only source of income, disagreements arose between them about who was to manage the family finances and how to spend the government stipend (Habash & Omata, 2022).

Gowayed's research (2019) examines Syrian refugee families in the United States during their first two years of resettlement. Syrian men, expected to be primary breadwinners, entered low-wage jobs with long hours, which limited their access to English classes. Conversely, many women, primarily at home, could attend language classes at local agencies. This access empowered women to manage essential tasks—communicating with schools, paying bills, using public transport, and accessing services—that their hus-

bands could not due to having limited English language. Learning languages also lessened social isolation and enabled women to establish local networks, serving as a means of practical empowerment and transforming traditional gender roles (Gowayed, 2019). Forced migration enables refugee women to pursue education, enhancing their autonomy, self-confidence, and household decision-making participation (Habash & Omata, 2022). Grabska and Fanjoy (2015) found that many men in Canada lost status in households due to gender equality discourse and women's rising authority.

The Social Reproduction Framework

Households serve as residential spaces from where individuals commute to work or school, engage in recreational activities, shop, and participate in social and political endeavours (Luxton, 2011). The household plays a crucial role in shaping gender relations, transmitting gender norms across generations, and assigning gender-based roles and opportunities to its members (Shelton & John, 1996).

Regardless of income, ethnicity, citizenship, or marital status, women undertake the majority of unpaid care labour, and structural disparities are woven into the social organization of care at all levels (Lightman & Kevins, 2021; Piate & Etukakpan, 2019; Vagni, 2020). Many modern Western countries have a gendered division of labour in which men work in the economy and women in the household (Ting et al., 2016; Washbrook, 2006). The social reproduction framework challenges identity politics by emphasizing that female identity is socially constructed. Social reproduction is the continuous, inter-generational maintenance of production and labour (Katz, 2001). From a feminist political economy perspective, it is related to three characteristics:

(a) biological reproduction of the species and the conditions and social constructions of motherhood; (b) the reproduction of the labour force, which involves subsistence, education, and training; and (c) the reproduction and provisioning of caring needs that may be wholly privatized within families and kinship networks or socialized to some degree through state supports.

(Bakker, 2007, p. 541)

Social reproduction "encompasses the work that must be done to ensure that people at least survive and ideally thrive and develop, as well as to ensure the economic system is perpetuated" (Bezanson, 2006, p. 26). In social reproduction, multiple players interact in a complex manner across different contexts. It is "secured through a shifting constellation of sources encompassed within the broad categories of the state, the household, capital, and civil society" (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015, p. 67). Social reproduction offers a framework for understanding how the state, the market, and family institutions engage and counterbalance power to preserve the labour needed in daily and generational human creation and maintenance (Luxton & Bezanson, 2006).

Various academic disciplines adopt various approaches to social reproduction, focusing on different levels of analysis: micro, meso, and macro (Bezanson, 2006; Fudge, 2014; Strauss, 2013). Despite increasing attention to care and domestic work in global policy agendas (Camilletti et al., 2018), there has been limited application of social reproduction literature to analyze these processes among refugee populations at the household level. Social reproduction theory helps explain the gender roles and responsibilities of Syrian families in southwestern Ontario during early settlement. Specifically, this research bridges a gap in the literature by exploring household responsibilities according to what is done inside and outside the household to understand the changes in Syrian

refugee households during early settlement. Responsibilities inside the household include (a) cooking, cleaning and laundry and (b) caring for newborn and school-age children and helping with homework. Responsibilities outside the household include (a) household expenditures: budgeting, paying bills, and grocery shopping; and (b) dropping children off at school and picking them up; attending school meetings, religious gatherings, and medical appointments; participating in recreation; and driving a car. The social reproduction framework demonstrates how these responsibilities evolve within Syrian refugee households during early settlement, focusing on gendered labour divisions and the interplay of unpaid domestic work and wage labour. This perspective aligns with [Munro's \(2019\)](#) argument that unpaid and waged labour are essential to household production in capitalist systems. Unpaid care work, often performed by women, is a cornerstone of this process, but it is supported by goods and services obtained through waged work. Unpaid care work is widely recognized as a fundamental aspect of women's daily lives globally ([Ferrant et al., 2014](#); [C. Lam et al., 2012](#)).

METHODOLOGY

In feminist methodology, researchers often take a social constructivist approach, emphasizing that gender categories and expectations for gendered behaviour are societal creations that vary over time ([Kelly, 2019](#)). This research approach empowers marginalized people and highlights participants' unique perspectives ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2008](#)). This study is theoretically situated within the constructivist paradigm. Qualitative research emphasizes lived experiences, where individual beliefs and actions interact with their cultural environment ([Denzin & Lincoln, 2008](#)).

My motivation for performing this research stemmed from my master's program studies in rural planning and development. In 2014, I researched two rural communities in northern Jordan. Since they bordered Syria, these communities welcomed many Syrian families. This research in Jordan revealed the significance of women's challenges in the migration journey and led me to examine their experiences in southwestern Ontario. Feminist researchers recognize their relationship with participants and the power dynamics involved. During my study, I engaged in self-reflective journaling to better understand the women's and their husbands' perspectives. As an immigrant woman who has been through a migration journey, I reflected on my own views, beliefs, and prejudices.

I am interested in the often-hidden realities of Syrian women's lives, particularly during early settlement. I approached the research by viewing these women as individuals with multiple identities influenced by social, cultural, and political contexts. While volunteering in Guelph, I built trusting relationships with the Syrian community.

I conducted phone calls and meetings with immigrant settlement agencies, including the YMCA in Kitchener, the County of Wellington in Fergus, Community Employment Services in Woodstock, Settlement Services in London, and Adult Education in Chatham-Kent. This study utilized a multiple case approach, which allowed me access to 12 communities. I selected potential communities based on the Government of Canada's "Map of Destination Communities and Service Provider Organizations" (2024), which shows the distribution of Syrian refugees throughout Canadian communities. This website initially helped me select communities that received Syrian families with specific criteria. In addition, semi-structured

interviews were conducted with single Syrian women and married couples aged 18 and older who fled Syria and came to Canada as refugees. I conducted the interviews in Arabic, as the participants and I shared the same language and culture, and this allowed the interviewees to communicate and convey their ideas unhindered by the need for translation.

The total number of participants was 54 (40 female, 14 male), and data collection was separated into phases due to the COVID-19 pandemic: before and during the pandemic. On January 15, 2020, the Human Subject Research Committee at the University of Guelph approved my study (REB number: 19-8-026). Upon approval, I started conducting face-to-face interviews, but in March 2020, due to the emergence of COVID-19, I had to stop because of the lockdown. I later applied for an amendment to my ethics application; on May 5, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Guelph granted me an amendment to conduct phone interviews with Syrian families. I then continued interviewing participants.

Because I collected data during the pandemic lockdown with restricted movement and only phone access to individuals, I used purposeful and snowball techniques to select Syrian families who arrived between 2015 and 2019. I implemented informed consent, anonymity, and robust precautions to minimize participant risks. Before the interviews, I provided participants with clear consent forms outlining the study's objectives, ensuring they understood their participation was voluntary and could withdraw without issue. I took decisive steps to protect participant privacy by assigning pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored on a password-protected server at the University of Guelph.

This study offers data from Syrian households and women in general. In a few instances, the husband opted to attend the interview and approve of his wife's views. Moreover, data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it more difficult to contact Syrian families. Households were chosen based on their relevance to the research topic. I only interviewed Syrian families in specific areas due to referrals, and arranging phone interviews with both spouses proved challenging.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Early Settlement Experiences of Syrian Families in Southwestern Ontario

This study's participating families were large, with family sizes ranging from two to ten members per household. The participants expressed profound happiness and consistent gratitude toward God for their families' safety. Most Syrian families attributed their happiness to the well-being of their children, as all participants were determined to secure a better future for their offspring. The mothers considered themselves fortunate to have arrived in Canada.

Three major themes were found.

- Theme 1: Syrian women experienced added responsibilities inside the household
 - Subtheme 1.1: Cooking, cleaning, and laundry
 - Subtheme 1.2: Caring for children—both new babies and school-age children—and helping with homework
- Theme 2: Syrian women had added responsibilities outside the household
 - Subtheme 2.1: Household expenditures, including budgeting, paying bills, grocery shopping, and saving money
 - Subtheme 2.2: Leaving the house

- Theme 3: Priority to join the labour market

Theme 1: Syrian Women's Added Responsibilities Inside the Household

Subtheme 1.1: Cooking, Cleaning, and Laundry

During early settlement, Syrian women had added responsibilities inside the household, including cooking, cleaning, and laundry. They shared that household work was their responsibility and that it occupied them all day. The amount of daily housework left them feeling burdened and depressed. While I was visiting one woman in her house, she showed me that her house consisted of two levels, and she was overburdened with housework all day. She indicated that housework was a source of stress that might promote depression (Offer & Schneider, 2011; Hoshino et al., 2016; Zannella & De Rose, 2021). However, many of the women, even those overburdened by household work, reported that it was fair (Greenstein & Teachman, 2009).

People's gender-role ideologies shape their expectations of men's and women's roles (Greenstein & Teachman, 2009; Van Willigen & Drentea, 2001). In addition, Syrian families, particularly those originally from rural areas in Syria, often adhere to traditional practices during early settlement in southwestern Ontario. One Syrian woman who settled with her husband and seven children in an RST shared, "We live the same way as we did in Syria; nothing has changed regarding roles and responsibilities. I am busy with my housework, caring for children, and nothing else." In Syria, gender roles differ according to economic class, family size, and whether one lives in the city or a rural area. A well-kept household, beautifully ironed clothes, and a homecooked meal are all responsibilities women delight in when caring for the family (Davis & Alchukr, 2014),

and for the most part, men are the primary breadwinners of the household (Davis & Alchukr, 2014). In this study, Syrian families were traditional, and some arrived from rural areas in Syria, suggesting that these men maintained restricted gender roles in their households.

Subtheme 1.2: Caring for New Babies and School-Age Children and Helping with Homework

Syrian women shared that caring for children was their responsibility. Unpaid care work is considered a female responsibility, an essential aspect of women's daily lives worldwide (Ferrant et al., 2014; C. Lam et al., 2012). In addition, many Syrian women had new babies and children of different ages while settling in, and they were solely responsible for caring for their children. Their responsibilities had risen due to their children's increasing needs, whereas in Syria, they lived with family members and received their help. Childbirth and childcare require nurturing and continuous attention. This responsibility during early settlement makes settling into a new context more exhausting and requires a longer settling period in new communities.

A Syrian woman who moved with her sick husband and five children to an RST community and whose youngest was 4 months old shared, "My responsibilities have increased since we moved to Canada. In addition to household responsibilities, my children need additional attention here in Canada; this was not my situation in Syria." More importantly, Syrian women reported that raising children in Canada differs from doing so in Syria and neighbouring countries. In Canada, the women became responsible for following up on every aspect of their children's lives, where they raised them while abiding by religious and cultural practices. Rabo (1996) emphasized that women have historically

represented both the progress and cultural traditions of societies across the Middle East.

However, a few of the women started negotiating with their husbands over caring responsibilities and received spouses' assistance with childcare. This was a new role for the men, and the women considered it a positive change. Thus, during the early stages of settlement, many Syrian men began supervising the care and upbringing of their children, particularly adolescents, ensuring adherence to traditional views. Nevertheless, the findings of this research indicate that women expressed satisfaction with the level of childcare support provided by their husbands despite its limitations.

Theme 2: Syrian Women's Added Responsibilities Outside the Household

Subtheme 2.1: Household Expenditures—Grocery Shopping, Budgeting, Paying Bills, and Saving Money

The social reproduction framework helps to explain how Syrian families manage household expenditures, such as budgeting, grocery shopping, paying bills, and saving money, specifically for women. For example, grocery shopping is an integral part of household expenditures, and it needs to be performed regularly. Due to the large size of these refugee families, it is essential to carefully budget for groceries. The Syrian women mainly noted that their husbands were responsible for their families' expenses in Syria and insisted on continuing in this role after moving to Canada. Some women retained their traditional roles regarding household expenditures. However, they started negotiating with their husbands over expenses, which led to sharing ideas, discussing issues, and making decisions together for the first time. These changes were positive for these women.

One Syrian woman who moved with her family to an RST commented, "Everything has changed since we moved; now we discuss issues and decide together. Earlier, we did not have this way of sharing ideas and decision-making." Furthermore, a few of the women had experienced equitable management of household expenditures since moving to Canada. They shared bank accounts with their husbands, allowing equal control over household expenses.

Similarly, a Syrian woman who moved with her family to an RST commented, "My husband and I share household expenditures and budgets. We have a shared account in the bank, and we share and discuss everything together. My adolescent children help with the house rent as well." She added, "I am responsible for grocery shopping, which was not one of my responsibilities back home. Now I do the shopping with my children." She said that while living in Turkey, she did not share any financial responsibilities with her husband. This evidence may suggest heterogeneity among Syrian households in the household division of labour. One explanation is that any observed variations between ethnic groups are due to differences in their cultural backgrounds, which may constrain the symbolic meanings of daily activities (Kane, 2000).

This study revealed that only a few women were responsible for household expenditures, and they carried this role from Syria. The Syrian women who had this role earlier highlighted their skills in managing household expenditures. They shared that it is a responsibility that requires organization and an understanding of how to buy household necessities during sales; moreover, they had to save money because they lived under strict financial constraints. These women offered a different perspective on managing house-

hold expenditures and proudly explained the importance of their role.

Some women highlighted that they could manage some responsibilities that their husbands could not in the new context, such as online bill payments and shopping. Interestingly, these women could learn new skills that their husbands could not in their new context. Many women commented that their husbands' low education or illiteracy caused them to rely on them to accomplish these responsibilities in addition to their full-time jobs. A Syrian woman shared, "My husband is busy at work, so I have to grocery shop, pay bills, and communicate with our children's school and doctor appointments." She added, "Now, if I ask my husband to buy me something from the store, he refuses and asks me to depend on myself. He dislikes shopping and hates shopping for clothes even more."

This evidence suggests that the responsibility of household expenditures requires organization, understanding, and specific skills to address them adequately, and the women were often more competent in assuming this role than the men. Women who already had these roles in Syria experienced greater control over household expenses as their husbands relied on and trusted them. For instance, a Syrian woman shared,

Household expenditures and finances were my responsibilities since we lived in Syria. I used to save money, and my husband did not interfere with house expenditures. Since we were living in Syria, he gave me money, and I was responsible for paying bills and other related issues. Currently, I am responsible for paying the bills. He trusts me and knows me very well. I can budget and organize household issues. Sometimes, we share ideas and discuss things, but he leaves the final decision for me.

Furthermore, some men changed to the extent that they wanted their wives to depend on themselves. This finding suggests that

some men have witnessed changes in gender roles and responsibilities since arriving in Canada. In the new context, women's roles are not restricted to the private sphere in their household as before, but they have a new role in the public sphere (groceries and expenses) and a voice. A Syrian woman shared, "I used to be like a princess who stayed home. Now, I am a princess who moves around a lot." Women who already had these roles in Syria experienced greater control over household expenses as their husbands relied on and trusted them.

Women who did not have this role in Syria had to assume it in the new context, where these families were forced to change their roles. One Syrian woman shared, "Everything in this context is new to us, and we must learn new skills to manage our lives and expenses." She had to learn how to budget and manage her household expenses, which was different from her responsibilities back home, as managing a household in the Canadian context differs from managing a household in Syria and Lebanon. These women were responsible for household expenses because their husbands were busy at work. Therefore, Syrian families faced new challenges in managing their households, and they had to decide who would take charge, regardless of gender. The household member with the skills and the ability to manage expenses had this responsibility. Furthermore, a few of the women arrived with a sick husband or without a husband, putting them in charge of household expenses for the first time. However, these women highlighted the importance of budgeting for their household expenses.

In this study, some women were able to save money; their saving method stemmed from the traditional way women save money in Syria, rooted in the Syrian culture. When a woman gets married, her husband buys her

gold jewellery to wear and to be a reserve against emergencies. However, one woman was able to start savings accounts for her children's future education. These women save money for their families to invest in a future project; for instance, a few save for a down payment to help their husbands purchase a home.

Subtheme 2.2: Leaving the House

Most Syrian women adopted new life routines during early settlement, taking multiple trips outside the household. For instance, they were responsible for picking up and dropping off their children at school and attending school meetings and medical appointments, which formerly had not been their responsibilities. These tasks were added to their household work schedule, causing them stress and exhaustion.

One of the Syrian women shared that she had to drop off her 7-year-old daughter at school because her husband did not have this responsibility prior and was unwilling to share this caring responsibility. Women's experiences in the CA and RST communities were stressful because if they did not have a car, they were responsible for walking their children to school. The social reproduction framework demonstrates how women's challenges are exacerbated when communities are smaller. For instance, since moving to an RST, one Syrian woman explained that a primary challenge was the lack of transportation, forcing her to walk her children to school daily and adding to her daily burdens. Moreover, several other women in RST and CA communities shared their experiences walking their children to school. The social reproduction framework highlights the challenges of inadequate infrastructure in rural communities, such as limited transportation options, which serve as structural barriers. This observation aligns

with Tobin's (2022) assertion that state structures significantly impact the activities of Syrian women in Jordan. In Jordan, state control over refugees' access to services, employment, and mobility is evident. In rural Ontario, the lack of transportation hinders Syrian women's ability to engage in social reproductive activities and participate fully in community life. This underscores that Syrian women's activities are not entirely autonomous; instead, they reflect a form of "reflective freedom" (Tobin, 2022) as these women navigate the constraints imposed by their new environment. In rural Ontario, their early settlement relies heavily on state-supported resettlement services and infrastructure. However, in Jordan, the social and economic activities of Syrian women are shaped by refugee policies. Both situations demonstrate how state involvement and the absence of essential infrastructure significantly affect Syrian women's capacity to undertake social reproductive activities and ultimately settle into their communities.

During early settlement, Syrian women were the primary parents to communicate with schools and to follow up with teachers about issues relating to their children. They maintained good relationships with their children's schools. During interviews, the women shared their perspectives on their new role and how they managed it with love; they did not view it as a burden that frustrated them. They exerted significant effort to learn how to communicate with the schools and were happier and more satisfied with themselves. They emphasized the significance of maintaining positive relationships with schools and teachers, viewing it as part of their mothering duties. This evidence supports the idea that women wanted to migrate to Canada for their children's education.

Their new context allowed these women to be part of their children's learning experiences and have a voice in their future education planning. This responsibility allowed them to enter the public sphere and interact with the school system. Their early experiences with schools may help women understand the new context they have moved to and boost their settlement experiences. A Syrian woman shared, "I put forth more effort and participated in various activities in this community; for example, I follow up with my children's schools, education, and I was persistent in learning the English language." She reflected on her experiences: "I do not feel I am different than the others; I am part of the community and confident in myself." Syrian women are now engaging in their children's education and cultural upbringing, which supports their integration and fosters a sense of belonging in Canada. This involvement helps preserve their cultural identity and also helps them build connections in their new communities.

If the family arrived with sick children and needed care and attention, another added responsibility for Syrian women was that they became responsible for their children's medical appointments. They explained that they learned how to depend on themselves to accomplish this responsibility. In this research, caring for sick children was the women's responsibility; the women had to depend on themselves to follow up with medical appointments, and this responsibility left them depressed. This suggests that these women are in need of emotional support and help from others in caring for their children and that they are not receiving proper care.

The new context and new emerging responsibilities forced husbands and wives to negotiate and act accordingly. For instance, a few Syrian women arrived in a new context with a sick son; they were responsible for

following up with doctors' appointments, and this had a cascading impact on their family's social reproductive activities. Moreover, Syrian women reported sharing the responsibilities of religious gatherings and recreation with their husbands. A Syrian woman shared, "During celebrations, we gather with other Syrian families."

Women shared that driving a car emerged as essential to carrying on their outside responsibilities, and the first time they had driven a car was during their early settlement. Men realized the importance of women's role in managing their outside household responsibilities and supported them. A Syrian woman commented after she passed the driving test,

This is an important day in my life; from now on, I will depend on myself to fulfill my outside responsibilities without relying on my husband. I am happy; I told my teachers, friends, and parents about my accomplishment; this is the first time I drove a car.

Driving marked a pivotal moment for numerous Syrian women. It gave them independence, broadened their responsibilities beyond the home, and consistently changed household dynamics during the early settlement period.

In other cases, a few Syrian women encountered their husbands' resistance to learning to drive. During early settlement, some men were concerned about their wives learning to drive, which sparked conversations and negotiations between couples. This allowed women to negotiate with their husbands and seek their support in driving a car.

Theme 3: Priority to Join the Labour Market

In RSTs and CA communities, Syrian women emphasized that their husbands' employment was a priority. They pointed out that their husbands used to work before immigrating to Canada and that they intended to

maintain this role during early settlement. A Syrian woman explained the importance for husbands to work during early settlement: "My husband used to work all his life, and when he arrived in this community, he stayed home, and he was not happy at all."

Most Syrian women described their husbands' working conditions as shift work, which required them to travel outside the community, while women stayed home and added to their daily responsibilities. Individuals seek and obtain employment with qualities that correspond to their gender's expected behaviours (Campion, 2018). In this research, men were mainly involved in construction, welding, and labour, which required physical exertion and long hours.

A few Syrian women in RSTs and CA communities joined the labour market out of necessity. One woman arrived with her sick husband and five children, and she had to be the breadwinner. Therefore, she started working to cover their living expenses. She shared her experiences and the changes in her life. Back home, her husband did not permit her to leave her household. However, during displacement, she had to work for the first time. After moving to Canada, the family witnessed additional changes in gender roles and responsibilities. She started working soon after arriving in an RST, and her husband became responsible for the household. She expressed satisfaction with her work experiences, excellent working conditions, and stable income.

In RSTs and CA communities, most women joined the labour market if required, but most mentioned their desire not to for cultural reasons. A young Syrian girl shared,

We are not used to working; we are initially from a small town called Dera. In our culture, women are not encouraged to work or even look for work. I used to tell my father I was interested in looking for work. He replied, "You do not need to work

and earn money; we want you to take care of your studies."

While some were interested in joining the labour market, they could not because of household work and raising children. A Syrian woman who settled in an RST with her family said, "Earlier, I worked in a pizza place for two months, but I could not continue working because I have a big family and plenty of responsibilities at home. Therefore, I could not manage housework and work." In addition, Syrian women demonstrated that the available employment opportunities were not suitable for women. One woman believed that most job opportunities available required lifting and standing for an extended time. Therefore, Syrian women, especially those who arrived with health issues, were cautious when entering the labour market. Furthermore, the lack of daycares was a barrier for women. A Syrian woman said,

Honestly, I am not looking forward to working outside my house. My children are all young and need care and attention. Also, it is not worth it to go to work and send my children to daycares; it is very exorbitant.

In a neoliberal society, the family is "the fundamental source of economic security and a complete alternative to the welfare state" (Cooper, 2017, p. 9). A healthy and stable family unit is essential for preventing individuals from becoming overly reliant on the state (McBride & Evans, 2017). These developments have negatively impacted women as unpaid caring work rests predominantly on their shoulders (Root et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

Little literature specifically addresses the changes in the social reproductive activities of Syrian families and their impact on women's lives. However, the social reproduction framework can be used to highlight

women's voices during early settlement. This study provides valuable insights into Syrian women's multiple roles and responsibilities. It comprehensively explains their lived realities during the migration journey and early settlement experiences in RSTs and CA communities in southwestern Ontario. This research addresses how Syrian families experience social reproductive work during early settlement and how their performance is related to decisions about paid work for this population.

During early settlement, the priority was for the men to join the labour market, do shift work, and travel outside their communities. Syrian families were traditional; some arrived from rural areas in Syria, suggesting that the men would maintain restrictive gender roles in their households. Consequently, the women were forced to take on more roles inside and outside the household to meet their families' immediate needs, and in moving to southwestern Ontario, they learned to depend on themselves to accomplish these responsibilities. For instance, when household expenses were shared between spouses, both contributed to and had a voice in financial decisions. This balanced power distribution within the household fosters autonomy for each partner and contributes to nurturing an egalitarian relationship. This evidence shows that Syrian women have increased power within their households regarding decision-making.

However, as governments withdrew from social and income support, families, especially women, were obligated to take on more unpaid work. This deepened existing inequalities in income, opportunities, and support. This broader influence contributes to challenging labour market integration, poor economic outcomes overall, and decreased government support for settlement and integration for most immigrants and refugees,

especially those who are racially stereotyped and even those with significant occupational resources (Root et al., 2014). This new daily routine leaves Syrian women overburdened, making integrating into small communities in southwestern Ontario more exhausting and time-consuming. In addition, the lack of transportation negatively affected these women and made their early settlement more exhausting. Enhancing transportation and daycare facilities can help Syrian women integrate during early settlement in RST and CA communities.

ORCID

Rana Telfah 

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4803-4748>

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