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# Exploring Syrian Men's Mental Health and Participation in Labor Employment: A Community Participatory Arts-Based Project

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Nancy Clark

**Background:** Refugee men experience significant discrimination and violence throughout their migration journey. Discrimination and violence do not end once refugees are received into third-country nation-states. Resettlement is recognized as a key protection tool for refugees to ensure protection and well-being, but only if their gendered specific needs are recognized and addressed. Research and policy on refugee integration tend to adopt a gender mainstreaming approach to address inequities across gender(s) but have primarily focused on refugee women Clark and Vissandjée (2019).

Stressors of acculturation, change in gender roles, and adjustment in gender role expectations may negatively impact refugee men's mental health (Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC [AMSSA], 2019). The Syrian refugee crisis is the largest of its kind and initiated an unprecedented immigration policy. Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada [IRCC] has resettled approximately 51000 Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2018 as a result of the Syrian Arab Republic refugee crisis IRCC, (2017). Burgeoning research shows mental health needs of Syrian refugee



men after resettlement can be attributed to low annual income and the need to support larger family households (Tuck et al. 2020; Immigrant Service Society of BC [ISS of BC], 2018). In some cases, refugee mental health is constructed through trauma discourse and biomedical perspectives, which may overshadow an equally important need to understand social determinants of refugee mental health (Lenette, 2019; Marlowe, 2010). Cultural explanations, stigma, and normative masculinity make it particularly challenging to elicit refugee men's

vulnerabilities and stressors associated with mental health (Hilario et al. (, 2017). Syrian men, whose identity is grounded in their role as the families' main providers of material and financial needs, may experience psychological distress if they are not able to provide food or money for their families (Hassan et al., 2015).

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada has also witnessed an economic and ongoing humanitarian refugee crisis. This crisis has exposed more dramatic unemployment rates, particularly for immigrants and racialized groups who face the most severe challenges in the labor market (Government of Canada, 2020; Hiebert, D (producer) 2020 *UBC Public Webinar - Centre for Migration Studies* [video] <https://migration.ubc.ca/events/dan-hiebert-canadian-migration-during-and-after-pandemic>. Against this backdrop, anti-immigration sentiments toward Muslims have grown since September 11, 2001, and Muslims have become targets of policy aimed at strengthening national security (Bryant, 2017; Clark & Saleh, 2019).

The majority of Syrian refugees identify as Muslim and experience multiple levels of discrimination and social exclusion. Studies on Syrian men's vulnerabilities show increased experience of torture, violence, and discrimination pre-migration based on their gender and ethnic identity, with profound debilitating and destabilizing mental, psychological consequences (Kisilu & Darras, 2018b; Turner, 2016). Most common hate crimes are motivated by racism in Canada, and where Arabs and West Asians are increasingly targeted (Mental Health Commission of Canada [MHCC], 2016). Syrian refugee men experienced some form of discrimination related to accessing labor employment pre-migration. In addition, being unemployed, underemployed, a secondary earner in the household can have unique effects on men and their identity (Affleck et al., 2018).

A study done on urban refugee men in Jordan revealed that Syrian men felt ashamed and depressed of their inability to continue with work and education and are forced into low-paying jobs (Care Jordan, (2013, April). *Syrian refugees in urban Jordan. Baseline assessment of*

*community-identified vulnerabilities among Syrian refugees living in Irbid, Madaba, Mufraq, and Zarqa. Rapid Participatory Community Assessment* <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/syrian-refugees-in-urbanjordan-baseline-assessment-of-community-identified>

These experiences may continue in the Canadian context and may lead to domestic violence and increase mental health challenges associated with acculturation stressors (Hassan et al., 2016). Mental health stigma among racialized Asian men has been linked to broader processes of normative masculinity, where strength is often equated with stoicism and passed down from one generation to the next (Morrow et al., 2019). Despite struggling with mental health issues and trauma, Syrian refugee men may be less likely than their female counterparts to access mental health services due to cultural stigma. When Syrian refugee men do seek help, it is more likely to be from peers, but there is often a lack of formalized peer support networks for men and boys CARE, (2017) *Men and boys in displacement Assistance and protection challenges for unaccompanied boys and men in refugee contexts*. CARE, co-published with Promundo. <https://promundoglobal.org/resources/men-boys-displacement-challenges-refugee-contexts/>

Immigrants' mental health deteriorates over time compared with Canadian-born populations, and refugee men report slightly poorer health than female counterparts (Ng & Zhang, 2019). Reasons for these differences may be related to gendered experiences post-migration. Gender identities are shaped by broader structures of masculinity across migration histories and cultural contexts for refugee men (Hyndman, 2012; Marlowe, 2011). Increasingly, social determinants, such as income, gender, and housing, are viewed to compound the experience of migration and resettlement stressors for Syrian refugees in Canada (Hynie, 2017). Studies on labor market attachment show that refugees are disadvantaged due to language proficiency (Frank, 2013; Sherrell, 2011). Refugee men are less likely than women to complete Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) classes—a finding which may be related to the gendered pressure to earn an income (Hyndman, 2012). Unemployment and underemployment are associated with poor self-image among refugee men, and the failure to secure employment poses risks to men's mental health (Bauder, 2005). Concerns about the safety and security of their families, unemployment, exploitation, and working illegally may also lead to increased trauma among Syrian men (Hassan et al., 2015). Overall, studies report a need for more nuanced understandings of gender-based distress. An intersectional analysis can be used to examine social identity constructs and how social

realities and structures shape masculinity (Affleck, 2018; Kisilu & Darras, 2018; El Feki et al., 2017). To date, little research attention has focused on the mental health of refugee men in Canada and the gendered effects of migration and resettlement. Additionally, few studies have analyzed the relationship between economic employment and mental health from refugee men's perspectives. Refugee economic integration is an issue of paramount importance that carries risks for mental health (Beiser & Hou2017).

**Research Questions:** The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What do Syrian men perceive as important factors in shaping their mental health and well-being in the context of their participation in labor employment? (2) How does unemployment and/or unemployment impact Syrian refugee men's mental health and well-being? (3) What are Syrian refugee men's gendered experiences of economic integration?



**Methodology:** This research is informed by a critical theoretical paradigm of intersectionality and the lens of cultural safety. Arts-based methods of photovoice will be used to elicit Syrian men's experiences, to understand their perspectives on the factors that promote mental health and community strengths. In addition, these methods can be a valuable conduit for language barriers and the expression of complex concepts, such as mental health (Lenette, 2019).

Participatory arts-based methods fit with this theoretical approach because they are used as a form of social activism that stems from a critical qualitative research paradigm, which draws attention to human rights and who has the power to speak. Intersectionality will be used as an analytic framework to examine the multiple dimensions that structure Syrian men's mental health, including labor employment. The central premise of intersectionality is that refugee men are not a homogenous category even when they may meet similar characteristics as refugees (Hill Collins, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hankivsky et al., 2014). Fitting with the photovoice method, intersectionality is explicitly

oriented toward social transformation, building coalitions among different groups, and working toward social justice (Hill Collins, 2019). Using intersectionality and lens of cultural safety, this study analyzes how power and privilege operate in the production of knowledge and an ethical obligation to mitigate potential harms caused by research.

**Research Design:** The proposed study is exploratory and participatory in design using qualitative, arts-based methods and principles of community-based participatory action research (CBPAR). CBPAR is an inclusive process that leverages the strengths of all involved by addressing community issues for the purpose of positive social change (Friedman, 2021). Arts-based methods of photovoice (a group activity used to examine the meaning of photographs and designing knowledge mobilization) and photo-elicitation (use photographs in the research interview to enlighten and raise awareness and co-produce critical reflexive texts and images) will also be used. Photovoice is complimented by photo-elicitation because it prompts knowledge holders (KH) to discuss particular themes linked to images during interviews and shifts the emphasis from researcher interpretation to the perspective of the KH to co-construct meaning. Different kinds of information can emerge through photo-elicitation, e.g., resiliency factors, that may not otherwise be gained through photovoice. Together these methods encourage active participation by community groups in collaborations with other stakeholders, including non-profit organizations and the government (Reid et al., 2020).

Using photovoice is a novel approach in refugee research and can provide a medium for telling more complex stories, expression of emotions, and experiences for people who have encountered displacement and who are 'refugees' (Lenette, & Boddy 2013). In addition, fitting with political and structural intersectionality, participatory arts-based methods place Syrian men as KH and active participants in the social production of knowledge on policies and practices which directly affect them (Cho et al., 2013).

**Anticipated Outcomes:** The mental health and wellbeing of refugees require a multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach. This research seeks to build community capacity for health in all policies to address international and national health promotion initiatives. Benefits to target audiences include not-for-profit organizations that work with immigrants and refugees and provide employment services, counseling, and health promotion programming. We expect that findings from this research will also inform policies and practices that

provide mental health counseling and support as well as family services offered through the settlement sector.

This research will also lead to enhanced training and skills in using arts-based methods and Community Based Participatory Action Research with academic learners and the broader community. Visual storytelling methods, such as photovoice, are powerful knowledge dissemination tools that can facilitate the agency of KH traditionally excluded from the policy-making process. Methods of photovoice and photo-elicitation provide opportunities for 'political listening' in ways that can be meaningful to produce social change. Through this research method, photographs and narratives of Syrian men will be exhibited. Understanding the unique vulnerabilities that refugee men experience during resettlement will build intellectual exchange between academic and community sectors. Media will be used to disseminate knowledge about Syrian men's experiences to a wide range of stakeholders and knowledge users, including settlement counselors and labor employment programs.

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