

STRESS IN REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT: SYRIAN MOTHERS' STRAINS AND BUFFERS DURING EARLY INTEGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Canada welcomed 25,000 Syrian refugees within a six-month period. On average, Syrian refugees possessed less formal education, had larger families, and were less likely to be familiar with Canada's official languages compared to earlier refugees. Additionally, many refugees (including children) arrive at their destinations with trauma.

This study focuses on refugee mothers' mental health outcomes, framed through the stress process model (Figure 1). Refugee mothers face enormous tasks involved in acclimatizing themselves to a new culture and environment, and strains linked to the care, schooling, and support of their children. Their well-being is vital to that of other family members, especially children, and refugee mothers' capacities to nurture their children depend upon navigating unique post-migration stressors.

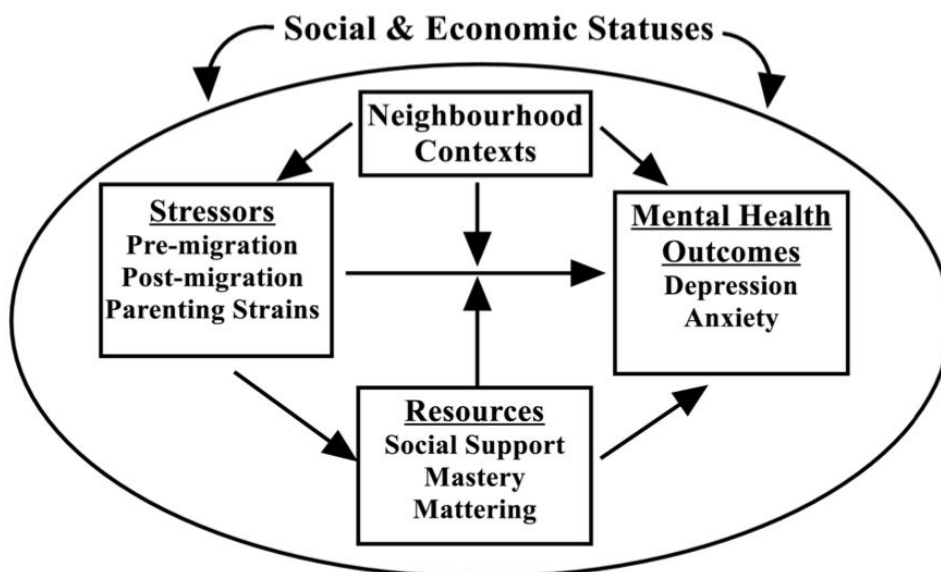



Figure 1. Key Stressors and Supports for Refugee Mothers in the Stress Process Model



RESEARCH QUESTIONS & **DATA AND METHODS**

RQ1: What are key stressors that newly arrived refugee mothers experience?

RQ2: How are mothers' resources of social support and self-concepts (mastery and mattering) part of the parental stress process?

RQ3: Overall, how do mothers experience parenting in the context of settling in a large Canadian metropolitan area, circa 2015–16?

The authors interviewed 41 Syrian refugee mothers (20 from Toronto and 21 from the more suburban Peel Region) from November 2016 to January 2017, and 28 from the original sample were reinterviewed 3-6 months after their first interview. Interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed in Arabic, then translated into English.

Wave 1 interviews focused on the mothers' backgrounds, stressors, resources, and experiences resettling in Canada. Wave 2 interviews followed up with respondents on their children's resettlement experiences.

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FINDINGS

MOTHERING WITHOUT "HOME"

A first-and-foremost stressor for Syrian mothers was the huge loss of a home, neighbourhood, extended family, and country that felt fundamental to mothering. Even when describing very dire circumstances in Syria, they discussed the deep comforts and community of home – which no longer existed.

In line with the stress process model, mothers' self-concepts also seemed to be important resources in certain arenas. Mothers' descriptions of saving their children by coming to Canada perhaps linked both to a profound sense of mastery in mothering and to a renewed mattering in which they and their children were valued as worthy of attention and importance in society.

**"THE DAYS THEY
WENT TO SCHOOL
WE WOULD BE
PARALYZED
WITH FEAR, THAT
THEY WOULD BE
KIDNAPPED OR
ARRESTED AND
THE WORST
WAS FEAR OF
KIDNAPPING.
THAT WAS WHY
WE HAD TO LEAVE
– MOST OF ALL FOR
THE CHILDREN."**



SCHOOLS ARE GOOD, BUT...

Mothers were generally pleased that their children now had access to a good education, were learning English, and had a future as educated citizens of a safe and welcoming country. However, they also reported experiences of maltreatment or discrimination, and either they or their husbands, often along with community

translators, had met with teachers when academic or social concerns had arisen. Thankfully, most school-related difficulties, both academic and peer-related, were viewed as expected and resolvable.

WHAT CAN I SAY? FOR [MY CHILDREN'S] FUTURE, PEOPLE'S TALK HERE SCARES ME. [...] WELL, THEY SAY THAT IF THEY ARE 18 [YEARS OLD], YOU HAVE NO LEGAL OBLIGATIONS TOWARD THEM; THEY GO ONE WAY AND YOU ANOTHER. IT PLANTS AN IDEA IN THEIR HEADS. THE FUTURE SCARES ME.

MOTHERING UPENDED

The relief of coming to Canada—possibly linked to a mastery or control over their lives and mattering to the society—was coupled with uncertainty about their current and future mothering. They experienced three ruptures in their mothering: 1) an upending of their authority due to language barriers and different norms; 2) dissimilarities in their values and those of the new culture; and 3) having their

place as traditional women and mothers altered in a more gender-equal society. With potentially inverted power relations between child and mother, the solution was often found by accessing a third-party via a school counsellor or sponsor.

PROPOSED STRATEGIES

*FOR IMPROVING THE
WELLBEING OF SYRIAN
REFUGEE MOTHERS*

Enable the ease of migration of extended family members to increase social support for mothers

Enable access to communication devices (e.g., internet and phones) to allow connections with loved ones afar

Publicize mental health issues experienced by refugees to host communities and service providers (e.g., social workers, teachers, physicians)

Help build capacities in local communities to integrate and support newcomers, such as supporting NGO and sponsor groups with anti-racism and multiculturalism training, community-lead engagements that help foster unity, language centres with free childcare, translators or resettlement workers in schools, cultural interpretation services, and mental health services

