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THEY ARE IN SILENCE: REFUGEE WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

By

Erin Elizabeth Herbert

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Science of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Women's and Gender Studies
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2011

THEY ARE IN SILENCE: REFUGEE WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

By

Erin Elizabeth Herbert
M.A., 2011

A Thesis Approved On

April 11, 2011

by the Following Thesis Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the women of the Family Center
whose strength, resilience, determination and warmth I will never forget.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Karen Christopher, for her guidance and support throughout this process, and my other committee members Dr. Cate Fosl for inspiring me to explore women's narratives, and Dr. Julie Peteet for removing my "hopes" and "wills." I would also like to thank the staff of Kentucky Refugee Ministries, particularly Elizabeth Kaznak, for their open and willing support of this research project. Your tireless commitment to refugee newcomers is admirable. Finally, I thank my editor, best friend, partner, and husband, Derek Selznick, for keeping me sane, fed, and in clean clothes.

ABSTRACT

THEY ARE IN SILENCE: REFUGEE WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

Erin E. Herbert

April 11, 2011

This work explores the personal narratives of a group of refugee women recently resettled in Louisville, Kentucky, participating in the Family Center program at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. This research shows that both local and national refugee resettlement policies are complicit in the marginalization of refugee women. These policies falsely construct refugee women as a universalized “other,” silencing the diverse experiences and needs of women resettled in the United States. In turn, scholarship and an aid discourse that positions refugee women’s employment as “supplementary” to male income is based on assumed social constructions of gender inconsistent with many refugee women’s experiences both before and after resettlement. Yet, many of the discriminatory practices in refugee resettlement can be diminished by an incorporation of women’s voices into the refugee aid discourse.

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CHAPTER I

Prior to beginning graduate school, I worked as a refugee case manager in a resettlement office in Denver, Colorado. During my years working with refugee newcomers, I began to notice discrepancies in the services our staff provided to our clients based on what I can only describe as a gendered divide. As U.S. refugee resettlement is an employment-based program with limited resources, the bulk of our services including job training programs, bus token assistance, and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, would be directed at individuals deemed most “employable.” The majority of times these individuals were male. Paradoxically, this division of services did not necessarily correspond to actual employment outcomes. As scholars in the field of migrant studies have shown, often refugee women resettled in the United States enter into the workforce within the first year of their arrival.

I began to notice that the frequency with which I saw, spoke with, or assisted my male clients was much greater than my female clients. Indeed, in a household with a husband and wife, often my entire interactions with the family were negotiated through the husband. This inequality of support became painfully clear to me a few months before I left my position, when one of my clients attempted suicide. Fortunately, she survived. Yet, when I reviewed my extensive case notes, I realized that since the day of their arrival, I had never engaged in an individual or unmediated conversation with this woman. Though every metaphorical box was checked and by all accounts, I had done

my job: where was this woman's voice?

In this work, I attempt to answer this question by exploring the personal narratives of refugee women recently resettled in Louisville, Kentucky. Over the next three chapters, this work demonstrates how both local and national refugee resettlement policies are complicit in the marginalization of refugee women. I argue that these policies falsely construct refugee women as a universalized "other," silencing the diverse experiences and needs of women resettled in the United States. I specifically explore the participants' views on employment and its intersection with their roles as wives and mothers. I contend that many of the discriminatory practices in refugee resettlement can be diminished by an incorporation of women's voices into the refugee aid discourse.

Overview of Research

This work is based on a feminist ethnographic case study involving participant observations and in-depth interviews with a group of women from four different countries of origin resettled through the United States refugee program in Louisville, Kentucky. Their countries of origins include: Burma, Cuba, Iraq, and Nepal. Each woman was a client of Kentucky Refugee Ministries' (KRM), a refugee resettlement agency, and attended the "Family Center" English as a Second Language (ESL) program. KRM is a refugee agency based in Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky that currently resettles just over 500 refugees annually. Having noticed that newcomer women with small children were frequently isolated in their homes and unable to attend English classes because they could not afford daycare, KRM sought funding to implement an "intervention" program.

The Family Center, located in a church adjacent to the agency's property, offers an English language course and on-site childcare for newcomer women with children under the age of five. Meeting for four hours, three days per week, the Family Center offers both women and children the opportunity to advance their English skills while interacting socially with other newly arrived refugee families. From September through the end of December 2010, I attended the Family Center classes two days each week, offered support as a volunteer, and got to know the women involved. In late November and December, I conducted feminist in-depth interviews to collect the personal narratives of 13 participants who agreed to tell their story. I conducted nine¹ of these interviews; my research partner, Melissa Cottrell, did the remaining five.² The interviews were carried out in a private room in the Family Center and each lasted 1 to 1.5 hours.

During these interviews, I sought to establish a deeper understanding of each woman's experiences of resettlement in the United States. At the beginning of the interviews, I broadly focused on how these women defined their roles within their communities and their families and how they viewed the Family Center program. Through our discussions and my participation in the Center, employment and motherhood emerged as two prominent issues of interest and concern. Consequently, I integrated questions on both topics into the interview process.

U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

As established by the Geneva Convention of 1951, a refugee is

¹ One respondent was interviewed twice on two separate occasions.

² Ms. Cottrell is an M.A. student in the Anthropology department, whose thesis project focused on refugee women's ideas of "success." She and I intended to share data and combine our interview questions to increase the volume of information we could collect in a short period of time. We did not discuss our individual analysis of this data. She has since chosen not to complete a thesis.

Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a ill-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

The United States resettlement program is constructed around employment outcomes. Ten large non-governmental entities work with the United Nations for resettlement of refugees within the United States. Those ten agencies then filter refugee populations into local affiliate organizations, such as KRM, who facilitate the resettlement process within the final destination cities. Resettlement funding comes through federal and state government grants based on the employment outcomes of refugee clients. A refugee deemed “unemployable” due to age, illness, parental status as a woman with a dependent child under the age of twelve months, or inability to retain employment within eight months of arrival, may be placed onto local funding streams, such as Social Security Income or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). These refugees will be largely removed from the outcomes and assessments of the resettling agency. As I discuss below, women constitute the majority of these “invisible” refugees and their experiences often remain hidden.

Theoretical Framework: Contextualizing Gender in Refugee Aid

Feminist empiricists purport that androcentric bias may be eliminated from research by simply adding women into their research samples while strictly following the tenets of positivist methodology (Hesse-Beiber and Yaiser 2004: 9). Many feminist scholars have since criticized feminist empiricism suggesting that the “epistemological assumptions on which positivism is based have been shaped by the larger culture and perpetuate the hierarchies” that characterize that culture—namely patriarchy (11).

“Adding women” into the research sample will do little to mitigate a male bias if the androcentric worldview through which the research is conducted and knowledge gathered is not judiciously assessed. I suggest the same criticism may be applied to the humanitarian aid regime’s attempt to “add gender” issues and create “gender policies,” specifically in regards to refugees and the displaced.

With the growing awareness of gender-based issues faced by refugee women emerging throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, specifically, with the publically documented mass rapes of Bosnian women in the early 1990s, the humanitarian aid regime came under great public condemnation for the lack of attention given to specific needs of women during conflict and displacement. Commencing with the 1991 *UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*, what emerged were nearly two decades of policies and procedures attempting to incorporate “gender” into all aspects of aid to the displaced. Yet, much like feminist empiricism, without critically assessing the androcentric bias of the aid institution, “adding gender” to the humanitarian discourse did little to address the fundamental causes of the marginalization of refugee women.

Anthropologist Julie Peteet suggests that in order to provide aid, the humanitarian regime must first construct a discourse that transforms refugees and the displaced from human beings with agency and voice to “objects of intervention.” Peteet writes, “aid discourses implicitly classified refugees as spatially and culturally liminal, as deterritorialized people in need of humanitarian intervention” (Peteet 2005: 51). Simply put, aid creates a new subject, defined by suffering, great need, and a general passivity—a body eligible to receive aid.

Able to mobilize political and financial support, and, thus, perpetuate the aid cycle, “victim” narratives become a key element of this construction of “objects of intervention.” As established in the 1951 and 1967 refugee conventions, the displaced must meet specific legal guidelines centered on personal persecution in order to receive legal refugee status. Determination of refugee status is largely driven through interviews conducted by the aid agency, in which the displaced individuals must recount their stories. Consequently, narratives often become the commodity by which aid organizations determine the “validity” of an individual’s claim to refugee status and thus eligibility for aid. In turn, those individuals seeking resettlement must further prove their eligibility by meeting a series of criteria established by the resettling countries. Thus, in negotiating the aid regime, refugees become symbolically a voiceless collective, “a silent subject, an object to intervention materially, physically, and psychologically” (Peterson 2005: 91). Indeed, the term refugee, itself, denotes an identity of intervention, predicated on a temporary existence.

Although the construction of “objects of intervention” is an attempt to create a generic, a-political, refugee victim, this “universalized” subject is not without gender. Indeed, Deacon and Sullivan argue that refugee experience and the discourse surrounding forced migration predicated the construction of the refugee as a male survivor of warfare (Deacon and Sullivan, 2009). Indeed, men are often construed as the ultimate victims of forced migration as the discourse surrounding the refugee crisis portrays displacement as a male loss of economy, job, property, and home. Displaced women, in turn, are constructed as “tied-movers, or dependents,” voiceless, innocent victims (Boyd 1999:

15). Consequently, “after their flight, women are rendered passive in a double sense, as refugees and as women” (Binder and Tonic 2005: 622).

As “objects of intervention,” women become further subjugated by the refugee discourse as they are constructed as male dependents. As Julie Mertus suggests “the humanitarian aid regime wrongly assumes that ‘men’s problems’ are the standard against which ‘women’s problems’ are measured and that women are concerned only with a limited list of issues specific to their femaleness” (quoted in Olsen and Scharffsher 2004: 392). Indeed, international aid agencies continuously refer to the plight of refugee women under the phrase “women and children,” inherently placing women in the same category of dependence as children (Hijab, 2009).

Terry Boyd (1999) reminds us that gender-based discrimination is not only a phenomenon in conflict regions. Rather, violence against women in refugee camps “co-exists with low chances for permanent resettlement” (Boyd 1999: 20). Boyd uses the term “sex-selective outcomes” to suggest that refugee women have unequal access to resettlement due to an androcentric bias of both the aid regime and the resettling countries. As Deacon and Sullivan suggest, in resettlement, “women’s experiences have long been overlooked in favor of a male-centered paradigm that governs the response to survivors of warfare” (Deacon and Sullivan 2009: 272). Thus, although women have specific needs, issues of safety, and face gendered forms of oppression, their ability to access resettlement is systemically inhibited by a bias toward the resettlement of men.

In turn, eligibility of resettlement criteria invoked by industrialized countries often values rapid self-sufficiency through high education and an ability to become

employable upon arrival. The United States resettlement program currently resettles approximately 55-70,000 individual per annum (Hoeffler & Martin, 2008). As resettlement funding is tied to federal and state government grants based on the assumption of a refugee's employability, agencies are assessed on the number of employed refugees within the first 120-180 days of arrival. Those unable to achieve this self-sufficiency (or family sufficiency) through employment constitute a "failure" of the refugee agency and can have a negative impact on the agencies' funding during the next fiscal year. As the humanitarian regime must perpetuate itself through the solicitation of funds, resettlement eligibility criteria tend to skew toward those considered more easily employable. Thus, many of the women resettled in the U.S. come as "dependents" of their husbands, the primary applicant for the family.³ These women are, in turn, constructed by refugee agencies as primary caregivers for their children and financial dependents of their male partners, and their employment is assumed to be supplementary to men's income. Yet, in the next two chapters, I illustrate how this essentialist view of refugee women's social position is largely incorrect. Rather, through their own words, the women in this study express a more complex and diverse understanding of paid work and its intersection with their roles as wives and mothers.

Methodology

All of the women in this study were young mothers with at least one child under the age of five and all had arrived in the United States one to six months prior to the start of my research. The ages of the women ranged from 18 to 35. All of the study

³ See Office of Refugee Resettlement Report to Congress 2007, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/ORR_2007_report.pdf Retrieved, 4/5/2010.

participants were married and had migrated to the United States with their husband and child(ren). Two of the respondents were pregnant. Over half of the respondents indicated that their husbands were working or had been employed since the family's arrival. None of the women were employed during the study.

My research took place in two distinct formats. Participant-observation was employed by observing and recording experiences in the English classes and the group discussions that took place in the Family Center. Throughout the course of my research, I attended approximately 128 hours of class time. During these sessions, I sat alongside the women, offered examples from my own experiences during discussions, completed worksheets, and worked individually with some of the struggling students. In order to assist the program managers, I substituted for the teacher in her absence three times throughout the semester, though I tried to position myself in a "teacher role" as rarely as possible. Though we found ways to communicate, and, indeed, some of my most interesting insights came during these class times, there were never interpreters present.

Consequently, in the second stage of research, I conducted formal in-depth interviews in the respondents' native languages, through the use of paid interpreters.⁴ Interviews built on the expanse of the narrators' stories and clarified information, meaning, and themes that arose during the group discussions. These interviews were conducted in a private, unused room at the Family Center. Field notes written both during and directly after these interviews recorded changes in body language, silences or hesitations, and the overall atmosphere, emotion, and mood of the respondent. My

⁴ Interpreters were hired through a list of trained and certified interpreters provided by Kentucky Refugee Ministries.

intention during this stage of the interview process was to have my voice, as the researcher, heard as little as possible. Therefore, my questions, in majority, were open-ended, allowing the respondents an open space to sculpt their narratives. Questions included: In your own words, tell me your life story. Begin wherever you would like. What does it mean to you to be a woman? Tell me about your life before you came to the United States? What was a day like for you? Tell me about your journey to the United States? What did it feel like to come to a new country? Tell me about your life in Kentucky. What is a day like for you? Tell me about your family. How do you envision your future or what are your goals for the future? In what ways have you been disappointed?⁵ Through this process of in-depth interviewing, I gathered the narrators' life stories and breadth of experiences through a co-construction of knowledge.

In her collection of oral histories of Moroccan citizens, Antoinette Errante (1994) writes of discovering grief in silences. Consequently, going into the project, I anticipated that grief and loss would likely play a role in any refugee's history, and a critical aspect of my research and analysis was attention to the silences, hesitations, and absences of my respondents' words. Yet silences may go beyond grief or emotion. As Patricia Leavy suggests, "listening for silences may also indicate that the categories and concepts...available to interpret and explain life experiences do not in fact reflect the full range of experiences out there, such as the experiences of women" (Hesse-Biber 2007: 159). Above I argue that the refugee experience has been constructed and politicized under a male paradigm. Consequently, the participants' silences may stem from a dual marginalization of identities as both refugees and as women.

⁵ I also included questions my research partner's project including: How do you define success? Has your definition of success changed since you came to the United States?

For the first few interviews, data was analyzed using a literal coding procedure, extracting the respondent's words. As the concepts of employment and motherhood became pronounced, I shifted to focused coding, exploring each narrative for text associated with these key concepts. As I discuss in the following chapter, though discussions of paid work and motherhood were prevalent throughout the narratives, the women imbued the terms with varied meanings and ideas.

The Interpreter Problem

Language was ultimately the most profound barrier to my research, as I do not speak any of the native languages of my respondents. Though my interpreters were professionally trained and certified, asking the narrators to tell their histories in a language other than their native tongues was fundamentally problematic. Indeed, I fully acknowledge that much of each narrators' culturally linguistic constructions of meaning were lost in the interpretation process. As Patricia Leavy explains, a feminist researcher understands that "language helps shape social experience...therefore, the language women use to tell their stories is doubly revealing, involving not only their own biography but how their personal biography has been shaped by the social world" (Hesse-Biber 2007: 164). As language helps structure and give meaning to our worldviews, the words the respondents chose to use are in many ways as important as the larger themes of the narratives. Consequently, my access to the women's experiences had basic limitations before I began my research.

Yet, we must acknowledge that in all ethnographic research, barriers occur whether language is shared or not. Indeed, the essential structure of qualitative inquiry,

with a researcher and researched, writer and subject, analyzer and narrator, is a process of interpretation. As Christie Ann Wright describes of her study of Burmese Kachin women in Texas, “I interpreted their stories through my sociological understanding and knowledge, as well as from my own social location. My sociological understanding of their stories may gloss over their true meanings and voices; not to mention the fact I am studying them” (Wright 2008: 25). Thus, though I believe the “facts” and details of each narrative were accurately interpreted and expressed in this work, the written narratives within this study should be read as *reflections* rather than attestations—photographs of original forms, acknowledging the presence of both camera and photographer.

Finally, language barriers cannot be used as another excuse to further marginalize refugee women. I firmly believe each of these respondents has knowledge that needs to be shared with those who aim to improve the resettlement process. Though I am certain my conclusions are open to criticism, I believe the importance of this research—its ability to initiate necessary change in the resettlement process, and thus bring about greater social justice—outweighs problems associated with the use of interpreters.

My Position

My interest in refugee studies began during a semester in Leuven, Belgium my junior year of college. Studying cultural anthropology, I chose an elective course on forced international migration, through which I had the opportunity to visit the asylum center of Brussels. In 2003, I continued my studies of forced migration, by joining an anthropology research trip to Thailand the final semester of my undergraduate career. During this time, I had the opportunity to briefly visit the refugee camps on the

Thai/Myanmar (Burma) border. Though I had no way of anticipating at the time, in 2006, the United Nations would begin permanent resettlement of the individuals living in these camps to other countries, including the United States.

Immediately following my return from Thailand, I began my first professional position as a refugee youth case worker at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Though only employed at KRM for one year, I was familiar with many of the staff members and operational procedures of the organization prior to beginning my research. Following my year with KRM, I became a refugee case-manager with an organization in Denver, Colorado. For five years, between my undergraduate and graduate education, I both volunteered and worked within the U.S. refugee resettlement program. My clientele consisted of individuals from across the world, including Burma, Burundi, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Nepal, Somalia, and Sudan.

When I became a case manager in 2007, my mentor, the executive director of our refugee resettlement agency, advised me that the greatest service I could provide to my newly arrived clients was to set aside ample time in our first meeting to listen to their stories. As such, I became an informal collector of oral histories. Some were brief and filled with silences, others were long and detailed, some expressed joy and celebration, others anger and great sadness. And, though I have left this position, I still carry with me the personal narratives of the many individuals and families that gifted me with their stories. Still, although I have many years working within an international, refugee community and have lived abroad, I do not have direct experience with forced migration or permanent resettlement. I have also never lived through war or conflict. I have not

experienced the violent death of family, friends, or community members. I cannot know what it feels like to leave behind everything and everyone you know for a new life.

My standpoint as the researcher in this project is, therefore, neither purely academic nor entirely altruistic. I began this research with significant background knowledge gathered from my education, career, and the personal stories of my refugee clients. As I discuss below, my vocational experience has led me to believe that the U.S. resettlement program is androcentric and, therefore, inherently oppressive to refugee women. Consequently, I approached this research with the desire to bring to light the voices and experiences of refugee women and thus promote social change, specifically with the American refugee resettlement program.

I consider myself a feminist researcher. I was raised in a liberal household by parents who worked for and consistently discussed social justice movements at our dinner table. Feminism was not something I “discovered” through my education, as is often described by my peers. Rather, I simply came to use the term “feminism” to define the ideals of equality and justice promoted throughout my childhood. As a Women’s and Gender Studies graduate student, I have come to understand and give meaning to the inequalities of our world in terms of standpoint, privilege, coercion, and oppression. Certainly, feminist epistemology informs my view of the refugee resettlement process and thereby the research I have chosen to pursue.

Reflexivity, as utilized in feminist methodologies, is the belief that “researchers should continually reflect about issues of power and positionality in their work” (Huisman 2008: 374). This process of reflecting, acknowledging, and combating my

position of power relative to my respondents was a key aspect of my research. My social location as a white, American graduate student in the context of studying my subjects placed me in both factual and perceived positions of cultural, economic, and political authority. My immediate association with the predominately white, American staff at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, particularly the program manager and teacher at the Family Center,⁶ led to ethical struggles and areas of discomfort within my research.

While my position as an outsider led to a disparity of power, I believe it also allowed the women to discuss subjects that were perhaps not acceptable within their ethnic communities or within the “Family Center” community of women. For example, Cho,⁷ a Burmese Chin woman, explained that she felt isolated and discriminated against by the Burmese Karen women in the program. My outsider perspective thus allowed my participants to, at times, divulge details and experiences hidden in the group context. Conversely, given the limited pool of resources, my Karen interpreter belonged to the same community as some of the respondents. As an “insider” within their intertwined community, I believe her presence severely restricted what the Karen women were willing to discuss. As I illustrate in subsequent sections, the Karen women’s stories rarely expanded beyond the boundaries of a master cultural narrative of “hope and peace.” Indeed, the contrasting length and breath of those interviews with the Nepali and Spanish interpreters from different ethnic backgrounds than the respondents only serves to highlight this point.

⁶ Both were young, white, college-educated American women.

⁷ All names have been changed for greater anonymity.

Feminist Epistemology

The feminist epistemology of standpoint theory, specifically as it is described and utilized by Patricia Hill Collins, substantially informs my project. Feminist theorists contend that the establishment of “who” is a knower and whose knowledge is validated speaks directly to structures of social power and privilege. Prior to the feminist movement, the history of social science reflected and, indeed, reinforced the validity of a white, male worldview while subsequently denying the voices and experiences of oppressed groups, such as women and racial minorities. As Joey Sprague reminds us, “in the kind of knowledge that gets produced and accepted as good –we find systematic biases toward the interests, experiences, and forms of subjectivity of the privileged” (Sprague 2005: 51). In response, standpoint theory postulates that knowledge is partial, local, and specific to the knower’s location in history, culture, geography, and social relationships (41). Standpoint theory, as defined by Collins, argues, “that anyone who reflects on his or her practical experience is an intellectual, a creator of knowledge” (45). Simply there is not one, universal “truth” to be discovered; rather, there are multiple truths based in the lived experiences of all individuals.

Sprague contends that “people’s use of stories from their lives...to communicate some insights is a cue to the wisdom developed through practical everyday experience” (Sprague 2005: 46). As a feminist researcher, it is my obligation to bring to light the varied “truths” of the oppressed whose knowledge has previously been discounted or ignored. As I have suggested, the refugee program and the research that surrounds it continues to reflect this notion of a universal, androcentric worldview. Through these

narratives, I intend to uncover untold truths of the refugee experience through the lived experiences of refugee women.

Location is a key aspect of my research. Standpoint theory purports that our physical locations, our place within a community, our social situation, and even the geography of an area all actively play into our formation of our social identities. Inherently, refugees live out their lives in vastly different locations and, thus, my narrators are creating their histories within and from multiple standpoints. Yet, standpoint theory contends that “crossing boundaries” while negotiating the differences between multiple standpoints creates “social knowledge” (Sprague 2005: 74). Just as Dorothy Smith (1974) argues that working women with children have greater access to social knowledge as they must “continually cross the line” between two standpoints, I argue the same wealth of knowledge is available in the constant negotiation of place, community, and identity faced by refugee women (74).

Ethical Considerations

In her 2008 inquiry into feminist ethnographic research with refugee populations, Kimberly Huismann reminds us “qualitative methods do not necessarily mitigate the dangers of exploitation in research” (Huismann 2008: 372). My role as an American, particularly as one possibly perceived to be involved with the refugee program, had a great impact on my relationship with the respondents. Refugees must submit to a series of biographical interviews to prove their status as refugees as defined by international law, before becoming eligible for resettlement. The staffs of the United Nations and other non-government bodies, many of who are American and European workers,

conduct these interviews. In addition, as the managers of the Family Center program approved and helped facilitate my research, my introduction into the community occurred through the KRM staff.

Therefore, I found it imperative that I establish my independence from those parties for several reasons. First, the interviews conducted by international aid organizations are very specific but are also quite limited. I wanted to ensure that the respondents understood that the breadth of our interviews would go beyond what they had previously experienced. In this task, I was successful with some women and failed with others. In turn, I did not want the respondents to believe that I held any power to affect or better their situation or the situation of their families. Consequently, in order to ensure that the process was not coercive and that the women's participation was entirely voluntary, I actively distanced myself from the resettling agency, the case managers, and the services offered. I began each interview describing my position, the research and my association with my graduate institution. This information was discussed through the interpreter and also included on the participant consent form, which was translated into each respondent's native language.

Yet my decision to distance myself from the services provided by KRM was the site of my principal ethical struggle with my research. Often, through both our casual conversations during class time and during nearly every in-depth interview, the respondents would discuss problems they were experiencing ranging from housing issues to medical concerns. When these issues arose, I struggled to find a balance between listening as a researcher and becoming an advocate for each woman's needs. As a former case manager, it was quite difficult to detach myself from my identity of "problem

solver.” Equality was also a concern. I feared that by offering my assistance to one woman, I would be likely inhibiting the development of my relationship with others.

Yet, I could not ignore the concerns and issues shared with me. I decided that when a problem was discussed, my response involved three steps: First, I would ask if she had discussed the issue with her case manager and would encourage her to do so. I knew this “solution” could be problematic. If the issue was of immediate concern, I would ask the respondent if she would give me permission to call her case manager directly. For example, during class time, Bina, a woman from Nepal, told me that two of the windows in her apartment did not have glass and were instead covered in plastic. As it was November, she explained that cold air was entering through the makeshift windows, making her apartment frigid. With her agreement I left a message for her caseworker explaining the circumstances. I return to this story in chapter three, but for now, I will say that this particular situation exemplifies the problematic nature of refugee resettlement.

Finally, I felt it was critical that during the research process, the respondents should understand that I had very little influence or authority to make direct changes in their circumstances. Consequently, I rarely answered questions or offered my direct support to the problems that arose. As Huismann describes, as a graduate student attempting to finish my thesis in a timely manner, I was bound to “multiple allegiances” (Huismann 2008: 379). I knew given my own time limitations, I could not adequately remain involved as an advocate in their lives. For this reason, I must acknowledge that my relationship with my respondents was not mutually beneficial, at least not in the context of the research. Although it is my intention that this research and the respondents’

narratives may be a catalyst for change within the U.S. refugee program, it is unlikely (if not entirely impossible) that this study directly benefits the women involved. Yet by acknowledging the limitations of my research relationship with these women, I attempted to create a more feminist approach to ethnographic study (Sprague 2005: 404).

One of my great concerns in working with “refugee women” was the notion of “representativeness.” As Susan Geiger describes, often social science research “gets collapsed into a tendency to ‘represent’ particular ‘Third World’ women...into a universalized ‘other’ (Hesse-Beiber 2007: 402). In my presentation of the narratives of these women from various countries of origin, of differing ages, backgrounds, and experiences, I illustrate the diversity and breadth of experience, political thought, and agency among refugee women. Indeed, I believe my analysis confirms that the monolithic category of “refugee women” is in and of itself an essentialization of identity.

Overview of Chapters

In chapter two, I examine the narratives of the women participating in the Family Center. I specifically explore the participants’ views on employment and its intersection with their roles as wives and mothers. In the final chapter, I discuss the Family Center as a space of intervention and offer recommendations for policy changes to both the Family Center program and U.S. refugee resettlement as a whole.

CHAPTER II

“DON’T GIVE UP AND DON’T THINK ABOUT GOING BACK” REFUGEE WOMEN’S NARRATIVES

Nadia is a young, Iraqi woman, originally from Baghdad. During the Family Center English classes, I came to know Nadia as a cheerful, yet intensely quiet women. More than many of the other students, she struggled with the English lessons, and I noticed that the other Iraqi women often took special care to help with her assignments. Given the language barrier, she and I had never spoken or connected in the same way I had with other participants. Consequently, I was shocked by her open, eloquent, and lengthy description of her life story. In its depth and profundity, Nadia’s story illustrates many of the themes running throughout the participant’s narratives. At the time of this interview, Nadia was twenty-two years old and the mother of two young children.

I will start in Iraq. My life was simple and nice in Baghdad. My father owned a shop, he sold food and things, and we had a car. But it started when Saddam Hussein was in the government. You know the Shiite people, always thought that Saddam Hussein preferred the Shiite people over the Sunni people, but it was not true. He did not care. He only gave them an apartment or salary. And as soon as Saddam Hussein went from the government, Shiite people start to bother us. They attack our home. They explode our father’s shop. They tell us that we have to go away. They killed our cousin’s husband by putting bullets in his head. They tried to kidnap him first, but he did not surrender, so they shot him. They came and they covered our faces with black things. Militia—militia groups.

First time when they threatened us, we moved, lets say, our area. There is a place in Baghdad called Karada, it’s for Christian people. We thought no one would find us there and we would be safe. We moved there. There is also many Palestinians in this neighborhood. One-day also big busses with militia wearing black and carrying the weapons, came up to all the apartments. They ask for

young boys at the beginning but the young boys, my brothers, they run away, because they knew that someone would come and take them. But my father, we think he is a very old man, so we kept him in the house. My mother, I have many young sisters, she put them in the room and she locked the room. And she opened the door to this militia and they told her, "we need to search the house. We think there's a weapon or something." So they search the house, but she won't let them touch the girls, but they try to arrest our father. She said "no." But they said, "if you don't let us arrest the father, we will rape all the girls." So father goes with them but we kept shouting. We looked from the balcony and our father was gone in a big bus, like he is a lamb. Pushed on the ground.

And there is a man in the building. He has a number for an organization, from Jordan; help the Palestinian people go to the camps. So we went to these camps.

And they come back again, they kick down the door, and they push down our mother and kick her, looking for our brothers, but they can't find them. And we call this lady, and we make the mass media known in Jordan about this. And this group (the militia group) is afraid, so after let's say, two days they release our father and our uncle. And when our father came back, he told us about what kind of torture; they tortured people like. He told us that they told everyone you will die by using only a drill. They make holes in the body and you will die. And many kinds of torture things.

Then the militia come back again and they said, "ok let's make a deal. You have to move. You can't continue to stay here, in this apartment. You have to leave. Go anywhere but you can't come back. Or we will come back and arrest you and we will rape all the women here." So we left to another area in Baghdad. But things continue again, we received letters. So our father decided, "let's go to the camp." We didn't want to go to the camp, because, at the very beginning, the camp was nothing. No power, no walls. We went to the camp but it was so hard.

At night there were storms, like sand storms, so hard that all the tents were ruined. We would have to make them again. And the children, if they had asthma, they would keep coughing. No hospitals. But step-by-step organizations would come in and they would provide us with heating and a small bathroom. But it's away from us. But it made things better for us. Security for us. It's on the Syria and Iraq border. The desert is there.

I got married in the camp. I met my husband in the camp. And I bore my first child in the camp. No hospitals. A woman. A woman who helped me, like old days. But after that, in all Iraq, there is a warning with our names, all families in the camp. They cannot enter Baghdad or any other towns in Iraq. All family names. They are "run-away criminals." They told us, "don't think about coming back in the future." Our father, our uncle, all of us, they know our names. Only, my brother, somehow, somehow they don't know his name. So he can go and bring some food and things back to us.

Four years. It is raining sometimes, storms sometimes. And we organize...when people march. And we asked for countries to help us, it was for four years until the end when an American organization accepted to take us.

My parents came before me to Kentucky. My sister had the chance to go to California with her husband. And, Inaya, she's my husband's sister. And Inaya also has a brother. He is still in the camp. He lost his leg. He was in Basra when the British army attacked Basra and he had his leg cut off by a bomb or something so he is still in the camp with Inaya's parents. And with America, they cannot have a chance, so they are waiting for France. His leg is getting worse and only the meat is falling down. All of his brothers and sisters are gone. Only the father and mother are left. France said they couldn't promise them. Maybe years. Maybe not.

First time we came here, the apartment was nice, nice furniture, but then small bugs. They start to be everywhere. The beds, the floor. So KRM came to the apartment and threw everything out and sprayed everything.

And we found out other people here, even the Iraqis, even the Palestinians, they change. They are not like the camp. They don't cooperate with each other, they don't help each other out. They don't cook for each other.

I asked why she thought people do not "cooperate" with each other in the United States.

I don't know. Maybe the life is difficult. They only care about themselves. "Myself only." Let's say from the camp to America. We don't know the ways. We don't know the bus roads. But no one helps us.

The first month I am in the America, a terrible car accident. The side of the car pushed me and they could not get me out. I broke my back. I broke my leg. Mohammed, my boy, his leg was broken. I got stitches in my head. They couldn't get me out. They cut the door, the policemen, with the thing. And I had temporary leg paralysis, the legs only. And I couldn't see for a while. Glass here and here (pointing to her face). I became ugly. They took glass from inside my mouth. But the doctors here are very good. Professionals. With the treatment, I came back.

But now I always wear a belt for my back that is broken. To keep it strong. It is always there and it hurts. Till now there is tool marks on my body. On my hands and legs. They took me to emergency and they said they would fix my head. But the noise, it would take time. And it hurts me very much.

I couldn't walk for a month. And then I used a cane. And there is a terrible headache always, even to these days. But I keep working in the daytime. My mother helps with the two kids, but I feel embarrassed to ask for her help. But everyday a doctor comes to make massage, everyday. I force myself to work and

take care of the kids because my mother is an old lady. There, life was difficult because of the money issues, but thank god, KRM helped. They find a job for my husband. I want to work also. I want them to find a job for me also. Even if my back hurts. I don't care, I want to work.

Nadia spoke for nearly thirty minutes without further prompting. As she had finished her narrative with the declaration, "I want to work," I asked her to elaborate by describing her future goals.

First, I want to forget the past. I don't want to live with past. I want the best for my children, first, and then for my husband. And then I want to learn English. The boy will be 2 years. The daughter is 6 months. To be perfect in English and a very good education. I want them to make something good and big. Enough for sadness, I want a better life. I don't want to stay in the low income. I want to work. I want a better life. Enough with the past.

I asked Nadia what are the most important things in her life. After a long and thoughtful pause she answered.

My family, kids, husband. I want to be in good health, to help them, to serve them. To work. But mostly I want to work.

In moments Nadia's narrative is contradictory as she speaks of an ideal time, long since passed when "we had a car," yet describes her desire to "forget" and move on. Extremely political, Nadia's narrative clearly establishes the persecution faced by her family, claiming and reinforcing her legal status as a refugee. Yet, for Nadia, her refugee status is fleeting, tied to the refugee camp as a temporary space. As a resident of the United States, being a "refugee" is not an identity that she claims. Indeed, none of the women in this study identified or labeled themselves as "refugee women." Rather, much like Nadia, in describing what is most important in their lives, the participants identify as mothers, wives, students, and, most interestingly, as income earners for their families.

The desire to work for pay to support her family was a critical aspect of Nadia's future goals. Reflected in her declaration, "*I want to work, I want a better life,*" employment was a vital component of Nadia's ideas about her future success. Yet, the desire for employment was not unique to this respondent. Rather, work for pay was a pervasive issue of concern, criticism, and expectation through all participants' narratives. In turn, nearly all of the respondents speak of their roles as wives and mothers as the most important aspects of their lives. Ideas about work and how paid employment would adversely effect and/or benefit their families were intricately tied to many participants' discussions of their varied roles as women. Consequently, in this chapter, I will examine this complex intersection of employment and motherhood in the respondents' narratives.

Overview of Literature

The intersection of paid work and motherhood has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. One scholar that informs this work is Patricia Hill Collins. Collins (2000) points to the false homogenization of theoretical explanations on women's experiences of motherhood and employment. Arguing against scholarship that frames motherhood and paid work antagonistically, Collins claims that "in contrast to the...the traditional family ideal, in which paid work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of motherhood" (Collins 2000: 184). Similarly, scholars suggest that many mothers identify strongly as mothers *and* as paid workers (Mcquillan, Griel, Shreffler and Tichenor 2008). Yet often immigrant women struggle to enter the labor force. In her research on Chinese women's experiences of migration to Canada, Guida Man (2001) argues that familial changes and governmental policies create barriers to

women's employment. Man finds that many immigrant women arrive in new countries without the extended family networks that contributed childcare and household labor in their countries of origin; in the absence of these supports, they are less able to engage in paid work (Man 2001). In turn, Man asserts that Chinese women become "deskilled," as "gendered and racialized institutional processes in the form of state policies and practices...and labor market conditions marginalize Chinese immigrant women" (Man 2004: 135).

In a publication of the same year, Jen'nan Ghazal Read (2004) suggests that Arab-American immigrant women's experiences of employment provide an exception to the predominant research discourse on migrant women's labor force participation. Read notes that the labor rates for first-generation Arab women rank amongst the lowest for immigrant women in the United States. Contrary to Man's assertion that the absence of an extended family network prevents women from seeking employment, Read suggests that Arab women's limited labor force participation cannot be explained by a lack of familial resources. Rather Read suggests, Arab women's absence from the labor force is "almost entirely due to traditional cultural norms that prioritize women's family obligations over their economic activity, and to ethnic and religious social networks that encourage the maintenance of traditional gender roles" (Read 2004: 52). Read concludes that first-generation Arab immigrant women are more likely to feel compelled to promote the continuation of traditional cultures and values, and thus choose to remain outside of the labor force.

Read and Philip N. Cohen (2007) continue this discussion of migrant women's experiences of employment in their aptly titled article "One Size Fits All? Explaining

U.S.-born and Immigrant Women's Employment across 12 Ethnic Groups.” Analyzing census data, Read and Cohen's research poses challenges to the applicability of existing categories of analysis on migrant women's experiences of employment. These categories include education levels, family conditions, the concentration of “female-type occupations” in local labor markets, and cultural assimilation (Read and Cohen 2007: 1715-1716). The authors suggest that these current models originally aimed at understanding men's employment patterns and are, thus, largely inadequate in capturing women's access to and experiences of employment (1730). Utilizing statistical analysis instead of qualitative methods, Read and Cohen rightly state that they are unable to “contextualize the unique experiences” of the ethnic groups researched in their study, calling for further exploration (1731).

It is in this capacity that the research in this study contributes current literature. The narratives below provide a unique, longitudinal exploration of women's experiences of paid work and motherhood both before and after resettlement. Unlike Man's study, this research looks beyond one ethnic group to the shared and contrary experiences of women from four countries of origin. Focused on women's first-hand observations of employment, this study contributes directly to Read and Cohen's work, contextualizing their findings in the lived-experiences of newcomer refugee women.

The narratives in this chapter will serve to illustrate the diversity of these women's lived experiences; yet, they also demonstrate patterns of needs, concerns and challenges particularly surrounding paid work and motherhood. In order to give analytic structure to these diverse and multifaceted stories, I have organized the narratives around three thematic groups. The first group consists of five women, including Nadia, who

have a “positive” view of employment. All women in this category express a great desire to work. Their narratives also illustrate many barriers faced by newcomer women when seeking employment. The second group consists of women who have “tentative” views of employment. The women in this category speak of work as a necessity rather than an individual choice or desire. The final group consists of two women who have entirely “negative” views of paid employment. Both of these women, who are from Iraq, speak of paid work as contradictory to their roles as wives and mothers and as a burden forced upon them by their migration to the U.S. This categorization is not to suggest that these are the only important elements of or notable patterns in these narratives. Rather, they are simply the categories of analysis and interpretation of this research(er). For this reason, I have purposefully left the narratives whole, with little interruption inside the text. The stories of these women, thus, remain open to further interpretation.

**“We’re crazy to work. We’re anxious to work. We want to work.”
Positive Views of Employment**

Myo

Myo is a twenty-eight year old Karen woman who spent the majority of her life living in the Mae La Oo refugee camp in northern, Thailand. Fiercely intelligent and witty, Myo was one of the leaders within the Karen women’s community. A schoolteacher in Thailand, Myo naturally took on the role of instructor during class time, giving particular attention to the Karen women, yet also extending help in English to other women in class. When, Ma Nah, another Karen woman began instruction at the Family Center in November, Myo took upon herself to “orient” Ma Nah to the Center and English program, introducing her to each staff member and volunteer. She encouraged

all of the Burmese women to bring and share meals each day. The teacher, Megan, often relied on Myo to interpret information and announcements to the other Karen women. As the Burmese Karen women comprised the majority of the class participants, Myo's assistance was invaluable.

Proficient in English, Myo agreed to do one interview with me without the use of an interpreter and one with the interpreter present. This unique arrangement highlighted the essential problem with interpreter-based interviews as I discussed in Chapter One. Though we proceeded slowly and at times had to seek clarification from one another, during our discussion in English Myo was much more candid, willing to express discontent, and emotional than in the interpreter's presence. As I experienced with many of the other Karen women, Myo's narrative through the interpreter became fact-based and detached, recounting dates of events with little enthusiasm. Thus, much of what I analyze in this work comes from our interview in English. As Myo's example illustrates, I fear much was "lost in translation" particularly within the Karen women's narratives.

I asked Myo to describe her work as a teacher in Thailand.

I'm teaching Karen, in the middle school I am teaching Karen language. In primary, I teach math, sometime I teach English. "What is your name?" "How are you?" I teach...Some students maybe 17 or 18, 15, 16 14. Maybe Primary school..7 to 18....I am a teacher, so monthly I get money. 500.

As she continued, Myo lowered her voice, as if telling me a secret.

When I live in a Thailand, my family is no good for me. Because I am a teacher. I get the money. And few money so, it becomes difficult for me. For health, for clothes, for eating. Many things. I am a teacher and one month I get 500. So difficult at first. Second I want to find a job, but no free. In Thailand no free.

I asked if Myo if she would like to be a teacher in the United States. Her answer reflects a struggle often attributed to refugee men, but rarely discussed as an issue faced

by refugee women. Myo would like to continue in her profession, but clearly understands the language and education hurdles she would have to face. Instead, she articulates what she deems a realistic alternative.

Maybe. Very difficult to for me. Maybe when we have a Karen school, I will teach. Yes. I want to teach the Karen language. For me, I want to, when last week, I went to my daughter's school, the teacher, she asked me, "what were you when you lived in Thailand?"

"I am a teacher too."

"Oh, what did you teach?"

"I taught math and Karen and English."

"Oh, you have to learn more English, because in here they need Karen teachers too."

I want to find a job, but I have no job you know. Maybe chicken or pork. I hear this country has a chicken job or pork job. Like when they put in package. I want to have a job but I don't have English. So a job may be difficult for me.

When I asked Myo what her "dreams are" for the future, she first spoke of her children.

I hope they (children) will become, good students, they will become a good students. Become the president (laughs). A good job, a good teacher or a good doctor a good missionary.

I hope I improve to my English, number 1 thing. I want to find a job, for my children.

For Myo paid employment is consistent with her role as a mother as it will allow her to provide for the necessities, *for health, for clothes, for eating*. As a former teacher, Myo speaks of the importance a good education and cites it as a key factor to success in employment. Indeed, when asked about her dreams for the future, Myo hopes that her children, one boy and one girl, will be successful students so that they may find "good

jobs.” Similar to many of the women attending the Family Center, Myo is conscious that her limited English is a large barrier to finding work.

Amita

Amita joined the Family Center approximately four weeks after I began my research. She arrived in Nepal from Bhutan in 1992, where she lived in a UNHCR run camp until her resettlement in Kentucky in 2010. Amita was fortunate to receive an education in the refugee camp and was proficient in British English. In the camp, she worked as a seamstress, making sweaters, scarves and hats, a job both she and Bina, another Nepali woman, referred to as “trade.” Perhaps given her advanced English, when discussing employment, Amita’s frustration was palpable throughout our conversation. In turn, she offers a concrete criticism of the Family Center program. Amita was unwilling to discuss much about her life. Yet when I turned the conversation to employment, she had much to say.

We can get jobs. But we are not getting any opportunity. We are not getting any work here. In the beginning we try too. But we don't have jobs. And we don't have job history. It's very difficult to get the first job. After that it will be okay.

When people are coming from other countries it is very hard. We have language problems. Sometimes we don't understand them. Sometimes they don't understand us. They speak very fast. That's a problem!

I suggest that her English is quite good.

We learned the British English. And American English is a little bit different. It sounds different. But we try. We lived in the camp for 18 years and we learned how to struggle. We will make it.

We were deprived of many things. We didn't get any opportunities. In the school, we just learned to read and write. But we did not have the computer. We did not have nothing.

I have never seen a computer. I have never touched a computer. Nothing. I think they should have one here. They have (computers) at KRM but they do not have at the Family Center. We need them at least once or twice a week.

I want my kids to get a good education here. Both of us (she and her husband) would work and earn money and support the family. I think that would be a successful life for me. Like if we can't get job, and KRM will not help us pay the rent. Then I will not be happy.

I will return to Amita's comments in the final chapter of this work. Yet it is clear in her words, "*It's very difficult to get the first job. After that it will be okay,*" that Amita's primary concern is her inability to find work. Much like Myo, Amita does not express any difficulty reconciling her roles as a mother and wife with paid employment. It is interesting to note that Amita does not view her work in "trade" as "job history." Rather she sees her lack of previous "formal" employment as a great barrier to finding work. Yet, Amita is confident in her ability to be hired and to perform well at a job, if she would only be given the "opportunity."

Maria

Maria arrived in the United States with an extensive professional background. At thirty-one, she had travelled to Kentucky through the Cuban lottery-based migration program with her husband and three year old son. Though there were two other Cuban women enrolled in the program, Maria was the only Spanish-speaker who regularly attended classes. She spoke little English but worked each day to communicate with the teacher and fellow classmates. During her interview I asked how she found the willpower to attend classes each week without any other Cuban women. Her answer reflects her great strength and determination to succeed in her new country.

For the most part, I realize that I am the only Spanish speaker in the class, but the other ladies, from Nepal and all, have been very admirable to me, very nice and

have treated me very well. So I realize, on behalf of everybody, if I don't force myself and commit to speaking English, I wouldn't say anything throughout the whole day, which means I wouldn't be able to communicate with anyone. So, for me, it's something that I'm grateful for, that puts me in a situation. I'm comfortable, comfortable in my own skin to know that I must learn the language to be able to communicateI try very hard. Sometimes they understand me, sometimes they don't. Sometimes I even speak to them in Spanish just to try to talk to them. But you have to. You have to find ways of communication. You just have to make yourself.

She was a warm presence in the classroom and, as she implies in her narrative, was seemingly adopted by the Nepalese women into their peer group. Indeed, I was speaking with Maria one morning before class, when Maya, one of the Nepalese women, came in. She stopped to hug Maria, looked at me and said, "She is my best friend."

About a month into my research, Maria brought a photo album to show me pictures of her family. Through her broken English and my broken Spanish, I was able to decipher that she had come to the United States to join her husband's family. Her extended family members were still in Cuba. Maria explained her family's decision to move to the United States in our interview.

I have left a grandmother, two older brother and two young sisters. I have nieces and nephews and my fatherMy husband has always wanted to be at his father's side. His mother and his father divorced when he was very young and, basically, he has always wanted to reunite with his father. And we wanted to give our son a better life.

Maria was extremely concerned with finding employment and much of her narrative focused on this need.

My life has been rather peaceful, but I have suffered a tragedy, because at 18 years old, I lost my mother. I had to take care of my family. I had to work at a young age and I always had to make sure I had whatever was necessary to provide for my family, my peopleI first started out, I have been working for 14 years, at like a retail store. I started out at the bottom. I worked as a cashier.

Then because I worked 14 years there, they put me as a central cashier, kind of overseeing the store.

When we lived in Cuba, both my husband and I worked. So it's really not that different. There, we had someone taking care of our son. So I expect that it will be somewhat different in the pay, what I have to pay for daycare for my son, but other than that it is basically the same. So my goals here, my goal for my life in the United States, is to appreciate and take advantage of the classes here. We're crazy to work. We're anxious to work. We want to work, so we can make a better life for ourselves. Hopefully, sometime in the New Year, we can move out and have our own place. My husband's family, most of his family is here, so there's no reason for us to leave Louisville or Kentucky, because we expect more people to come into the United States and there's still paperwork to be done. So basically, it's just a matter of bettering our lives, bettering our son's life through education.

I don't have a dream job. When we are eligible to apply for work, I am just interested in whatever the Lord is willing to put in front of us. To work as hard and long as we possibly can. To take life as it comes and to better ourselves. To look to get ahead in life.

Maria sees herself as an important economic actor in her family, both prior to and after resettlement. Having worked after the birth of her child in Cuba, Maria clearly articulates her need to find childcare once she is employed but expresses no disjuncture between her roles as a mother and as a financial contributor to her family's income. Indeed, with the death of her own mother, Maria describes at a young age symbolically taking her mother's place as a wage laborer and as a provider for her family, "her people."

Aung

After completing the interview process with the Family Center participants, the Burmese Karen interpreter, Aung, and the Iraqi Arabic interpreter, Fatimah, asked to share their narratives as well. I believe their strong desire to tell their stories and have them be heard further reflects how pervasive refugee women are silenced in resettlement.

Shortly after her arrival, Aung married her husband and became pregnant. Though she is not a participant in the Family Center program, as one of the few certified Karen interpreters, Aung is an integral member of the Karen community in Louisville. As I have suggested, the intimacy of that community and Aung's place in it, certainly affected the willingness, or more accurately, unwillingness of the Karen women to share during our interviews. For this reason, I believe it is important to include Aung's narrative in this text.

In 2008, she arrived in Kentucky with her family of seven. The eldest sibling, she has two younger sisters and two brothers. Aung was a recent convert to Christianity and, as such, her narrative contains undertones of the Christian practice of "witnessing" the presence of God in one's life.

For me, before I live in Thailand. We have come to Thailand in 2002. In 2004, someone called us to have interview to come to the United States. But we cannot understand English. We do not know and they do not have an interpreter. So we lose. So we try again and again. And we ask. And they say we have to live in camp. And we live in there in 2006. And in 2008, we came here. Three years.

I came with my parents and two sisters and two brothers. We have like 7. (laughs) I already knew my husband in the camp. And we were like boyfriend and girlfriend. But we promise to marry here. Yes. And we try to meet here. Because we are afraid that we didn't put together our case and he is with his family and I am with my family.

One day when I came, my husband's grandmother, she pray for us. "You have to see soon. You live apart a long time. Not over here. You have to meet over there." But I don't believe. I am afraid. I don't believe when I came here. And God is really big for me. In like three months, I am meeting my husband. I meet my husband in New York when I live here now for three months. I go to New York and I marry my husband there. And I am very happy.

And there I start to believe in God. And I never thought of God before that. And I think back, I am going back, and I think, oh yeah, God is certainly here. And now I believe. And start, how do you say, I went to the church and get dedication, baptism. In 2008, I have a three months pregnancy. And when I come here (to Kentucky) again my mom and my parents are afraid that I am not near them.

They are already old. They don't know how to do. They call me to come back. So I come back. I take care of them too.

And then, I don't have a job. I start to find a job, but I don't yet have one. And here, I come to the Family community Center, and I learn and I study and I start to learn. And in 2009 and 2010, I apply for a job but I never get it. I apply in Catholic Charities and I get an interview there. When I interview for a job, I get a job as an interpreter. And I'm like, Oh my God. Yeah.

I ask Aung to talk more about her life in Thailand.

At school. One teacher. I loved him a lot. He is also Karen. He is also like me. We don't have a home. We have to run. He taught me, like in my insides, I hurt too. He hurts too. Like me. I am sorry for him. And I think also we are the same because we are older. He is also an older brother. I am older sister so I have to think more than others.

I went to school. And when I can home we had to do like farming. When I came home at like 2:00, we had to do homework, help with farm, and cook and anything we needed to do. Yeah, a lot of work. For me, I think it is good. I help my brother. He is sick. My sister is like three years old, my brother is five. I bring them to school.

Yes, I told my teacher "please because my mom has a job. And nobody can take care of them. Can I take them? Can I bring them to school?" "Okay it's fine for you." And they come every day to school.

The same life, you know? And when my child goes to school, my sister will go to school and he will go with her. Sometimes I envy my brother and sister. They told me, "I'm sorry. Especially for you I'm so sorry." You have to pray because your background is like so, so sad. You have to think and you have to do good. Because before our life is no good. Because in here is peace.

Prompted, Aung speaks about her paid work.

My husband, he got laid off. Right now he takes care of my child. Because before my child have daycare. When I came here everything changed. My life changed.

Over there I have a job too. I worked in P, P and T, like a woman's health clinic. Yeah. I checked the blood pressure; give them the medicine. P, P & T. Planned Parenthood. I worked there like 7 or 8 months, and then I have to come here.

I ask if she would want to do similar work in Kentucky.

I do. Right now I want to start to get more education. I want to get a GED first, and then I will start to get certificate and I want to be a nurse. I'm hoping to be a nurse.

Like the other women profiled above, Aung sees herself as an important economic actor in her family and in her community. Like Myo, Aung was educated and was therefore able to find employment in the institutions operating inside the refugee camp. She expresses great pride in her ability to fulfill the responsibilities as an eldest sibling and to financially support her family. Having found employment as an interpreter for the Karen community, Aung symbolically continues to perform and extend this caregiving role through her paid labor.

In her excellent account of Chicana and Mexican immigrant women's constructions of motherhood and employment, Denise Segura (2007) argues that cultural constructions of public and private space influence how women engage with the intersections of employment and motherhood. In her description of "involuntary nonemployed mothers," Segura suggests that the women in her study with a positive view of employment tended "not to dichotomize social life" into public and private spheres (Segura 2007: 377). Rather, they describe motherhood and employment as compatible, existing in overlapping social spaces.

Similarly, the women in this first group all describe financially providing for their families as continuing the work of motherhood. At twenty-two, Nadia did not have the opportunity to work before fleeing to a refugee camp; yet, she is eager to begin work in the U.S. Myo, a schoolteacher, sees her lack of English as the greatest barrier to her employment success. Amita worked as a seamstress and is frustrated by the lack of work "opportunities" offered by the Family Center. Maria, retail shop cashier, immigrated to

Kentucky to join her husband's extended family. Aung worked as a nurse in a Planned Parenthood clinic in Thailand and now interprets for the Karen community. Though they represent four different ethnicities and their experiences prior to resettlement differed in extraordinary ways, the narratives of Nadia, Myo, Amita, Maria, and Aung all illustrate a positive view of wage labor and the importance of employment in these women's lives both prior to and after resettlement. As noted by Collins and Man, motherhood and work are not opposing forces for the women in this group. Rather, in these cases, each of the respondents describes work for pay as another function of womanhood and one way in which they aim to support their children as mothers.

**“I will be happier if I can get a small job, so I can support my family.”
Tentative Views of Employment**

Fatimah

Fatimah is a middle-aged woman from Iraq who acted as the interpreter for my interviews with the Iraqi women in the Family Center. Though she was not currently enrolled in the Center, like Aung, Fatimah was eager to share her story as well. In 2006, after six years of marriage and one son, Fatimah's husband left her to marry another woman. In 2008, destitute and fearing for her son's survival, Fatimah bravely took a position as an interpreter for the United States military operating inside of Iraq.

He divorced me, he did not care that we had a son. He divorced me and he used to give me money and support me, but after the divorce he did not care about his son or give me money to take care of him.....So I had to go find a job. I tried everywhere, but it was very difficult because it was the middle of the war and I was a single, divorced mother. One day I was turned down and I started to cry, my son was with me, and some soldiers were there and they asked me what was wrong. I told them I could not find a job, they said you can speak English well,

go and take a test to work with the US forces in the green zone. They gave me a letter and told me if you do not pass there is nothing we can do for you. So I went the next day and I passed, so I went to work and interpreted for families or people who had an appointment with the US forces. I worked with them for three years and my life changed. A good salary, 2000, and I did not need my husband anymore. Usually when you work with the army they want you to stay on base, but I told them that I had a son and since I was divorced I needed to go home and come back every day. It's optional, but it is dangerous to go and come. ... The threat on my life got worse and worse, letters. Now when I think about it, going and coming with all of the danger, I think was I crazy, what did I do?

Prompted, Fatimah explains how her ex-husband felt about her employment with the United States government.

He was afraid for himself and his new family. He wondered if they were watching him and who came and went from his house. He became so jealous because he knew that I didn't need him anymore and that I would not come and beg him for money.

Asked if she believed her life in the U.S. is better or worse than Iraq, Fatimah answered:

The expenses here have made it difficult, but I don't mind. I always never expect anything from other people. I always depend on myself. Here you have to have a good job, full time, if you want to be successful. My sister (who lives in Sweden) helps me. She sends me money when she can. Sweden supports refugees. One thousand for her and her kids and they pay the rent. They provide everything.

When asked if she thought of migrating to Sweden, she simply states that there would be no point, because she would still be required to work.

No I can't because I have my green card and to be a refugee in Sweden you can't have residency in any country. Being an American citizen they would say go and work and live. If I were a refugee they would support me.

For Fatimah, entering into wage labor was not a free choice but rather a necessary conclusion to her divorce and her husband's financial abandonment. Though she speaks with great pride about her salary and the independence it afforded her from her ex-

husband, Fatimah laments the loss of support and the positions she should have held as a married woman and mother. Indeed, when she speaks of her sister, Fatimah is notably jealous of the financial assistance she receives from the Swedish refugee program and her ability to care for her children without entering into wage labor. As evident in her narrative, Fatimah views paid employment as necessary response to her divorce and her resettlement in the U.S. Unlike the women with positive views of employment, Fatimah would not work were it not for economic reasons.

Bina

Bina's story of migration from Bhutan to Nepal in 1992, followed by resettlement in 2010, is quite similar to Amita's. A skilled seamstress with an employment history in "trade," Bina has been able to sell some of her products in Louisville through a church connection. She articulates a desire to work a "small job," but would prefer to continue with her trade.

We are originally from Bhutan. But we left Bhutan in 1992 we moved to Nepal and lived there for 18 years.

When we came to Nepal, we were small. Each day we would go to school and come back. And my mom and dad would take care of us. I was 14 years. We had lots of problems. Like it was very hard to get the water. We had to wait with our cans in the lines. We had to wait in the lines 3 or 4 hours to get the water. And we had to like get oil to cook food and stuff to cook food and sometimes we do not get the oil in time so we have to go to the forest to get the firewood. Yeah, and we don't have any knife to cut the firewood, and we have to break it with hands to get the firewood. And that also was not legal. It was illegal if you go to the forest. If somebody catch then that would be a problem. So you would just hide, go and collect.

We had water supply but lots of people. We should wait for our turn. Just take our cans and wait. Like in the morning, like 2 or 3 hours, we have to keep our cans in line.

We lived in the camp for a long time. We struggled a lot. We tried to go back to our home country, Bhutan, but we didn't. Even those with education. None of them were successful. So we had a last choice to come to the United States. We had many problems in the camp. So we had no choice. So we willingly signed the papers to come to the United States

Yes, and some people are still interested. They are not signing the papers. They are still waiting in the camp. Many people are not educated, they cannot speak English, they cannot understand. And we had many problems. Even my family, they cannot speak English, they cannot understand. So if they come here, what can they do. If they come here, how can they live? Because it's very hard to get a job. And if they don't get a job, what will be the conditions for them? So they are very scared to come here because of the language problem.

In the beginning, I could not go anywhere, because I was scared to be lost. So I just stayed at home. Now... I trade. I like making scarves.

In the stores. People from the church. A Spanish church.

Like, after 15 I couldn't do anything in Nepal. I can do trade. I can make Nepalese dress. If I can get a job, like what I learn in Nepal, it will be much easier for me to do that one. I am happy here because my kids go to school, and they will get an education. I will be happier if I can get a small job, so I can support my family.

I ask what life is like for women in the United States.

Like, um, it depends upon the level of education. A lady who is educated, she can do any type of work and she can own things, she can support a family. Like a husband and wife they can work together and have a beautiful life.

Bina expresses a desire to work a “small,” part-time job or to continue to provide financial assistance to her family by selling her textile products. She does not describe herself as the primary economic provider for her family. Unlike the majority of the respondents' partners, Bina's husband had recently found a job through the KRM employment services, which may have tempered her need for paid work. As such, Bina speaks of a desire to contribute financially to her family through work that will allow her to continue fulfilling her domestic responsibilities.

Than

Than is a Burmese Karen woman who spent the majority of her life in a refugee camp in Northern Thailand. Both of her parents passed away before her eighth birthday, the circumstances of which she claimed to have no memory. She spent her childhood living and working on her aunt and uncle's farm and never received a formal education. Consequently, Than was one of two women in the Family Center class that was illiterate in her native language. Much like Nadia, she was rather quiet in the classroom, but when asked to share her story through an interpreter, gave an extensive answer. It is interesting to note that Than was the only respondent that chose to begin with her life in the United States.

I want to start when I came here. When I came here, I am very happy. I am excited because it is better for my child and my family. Because, in here, my child will get an education too. And for us too we get an education and a good life too. When we live in Thailand, in the camp, we don't have anything. If we have money, we have something, if we don't have money, we don't have anything. But in here, it is different. We have everything. For us, we come here we can go higher and higher, have more and more. And there, nothing.

When I got off the airplane, when I see the caseworker to pick up us, we are happy. More than. And sometimes we are afraid too. But I am happy more than afraid, because when the caseworker picked me up, I had my uncle and my aunt too. I had family here. I am happy more than before. And when I get into my apartment, there are more Karen people.

Very different. Because in here we have freedom. Free. Free way of life. If we want to go there, we can go there. If we want to buy something, we can buy something. But in the camp, we never get out. We have to stay like a jail. We cannot get out. We cannot go around. But in here, we go to school. We take a bus. We have an apartment. We have friends. We have shopping. There is freedom and peace for us too.

I asked her to tell me about her life in Thailand. She hesitated and the brevity of her answer was in strong contrast to her description of her life in Kentucky.

Yes. I was 8 or 9 or 10 years old when we moved to the camp, but I don't remember. But I've never been to the school. Yeah, I've never been to school. And, when we are little, we had to do one day for farming, one day for hunting. And I don't have a mother, I don't have a father, I don't have parents. I live with my aunt and uncle. My parents passed away. And, we have to do a farm and plant and sell. And I don't have time to go to school and nobody ever took me to school. And I have never been to school.

I prompted Than to tell me what a day was like for her in the Thai camp. Her answer alludes to an interesting theme I saw throughout the majority of the Karen women's narratives—shared responsibility for housework and childcare by both the husband and wife.

In the camp, sometimes we go eat. I have job to work on the farm; they had sort of a farm for jobs. If I went, my husband would stay home to take care of the children and house. If I could not go, I would stay home and take care of the children and everything. Take care of the house, and my husband would go.

When asked about her dreams for the future, Than responded:

I hope for them, my children, because here the education is different, education is a high level. If one day, they have already gone to college, I want them to get a good job, like a doctor or something.

For me, I want a good job. A regular job. And take care of my children.

I am happy, because when the teacher talks to me in English, I am starting to understand a little too.

It was never clear in our conversation what factors would determine if Than or her husband would work on the farm. Yet her narrative suggests mutual and shared responsibility of both men and women for paid work, care-giving and upkeep of the home. As a subsistence farmer, her discussion of wage labor is quite limited. Rather, for Than, receiving the education she was denied and giving her children the opportunity to be educated are her primary concerns.

As a trade laborer and farmer, Bina and Than have experiences of work in the same social space as their familial responsibilities. Consequently, both describe wage labor as secondary to other concerns including care for their children and receiving an education. Though they would like to contribute to their family's financial stability, neither woman depicts herself as a primary economic actor nor do they describe a great desire to work. Conversely, Fatimah's reluctance towards work is derived from her contradictory feelings of pride and humility. In her narrative, she is satisfied at having successfully freed herself from her ex-husband's financial control and is proud that she is able support her son. Yet she laments her inability to retain the social positions traditionally ascribed to a wife and mother. Fatimah's description of her life before and after her divorce hints at an ideology that genders public and private space. A similar discourse plays heavily into the narratives of the two Iraqi women who have a "negative" view of paid employment.

**"I think life got worse because now I must have a job."
Negative Views of Employment**

Inaya

Inaya, Nadia's sister-in-law, is a twenty-year-old woman from Iraq. She had been in the United States for over six months when I began my research in the program and was approaching the end of financial assistance from KRM. Though her husband worked, Inaya's family could not afford daycare so she still attended classes at the Family Center. At the time of our interview, Lauren, the director of the Center, was arranging for Inaya to receive part-time employment as a child-care worker at the Center.

Though this position would allow her earn a small income without having to pay for daycare, Inaya was not happy that she would no longer be attending English classes with the other women. Indeed, when asked to describe her life in the United States, Inaya's answer was quite pessimistic.

I think life got worse because now I must have a job and I can't speak English and I have to learn. This will be difficult. I like the camp life more than here. Life was difficult in the camp but in many ways it was better for me there....It is different. To be successful here you have to have a good job, you have to have your degree, and it is very difficult. In Iraq it is easier, if you find a good husband and he has a good job and money then you will be successful. Here I will have to get a job and get a certificate to be successful....Being a woman in Iraq is easier, nothing is required of you except to get married and have kids. That's it. But being a woman here is much more difficult. Even if you are married, you have to work and study.

Inaya's anger and frustration when describing her need to participate in paid work was palpable during our interview. Though she clearly understood that her family was in financial need, she describes employment as contrary to her identity as a woman and, specifically, as a married woman with a child. This conflict between the need for paid work and her identity as a woman was also central to Afrah, who is from Iraq as well.

Afrah

At thirty-three, Afrah was one of the oldest women attending classes in the Family Center. Like Myo, Afrah had a strong background in English and often assisted other women with their assignments. In Iraq, Afrah's natal family was comfortably middle-class if not wealthy and was able to send her to study law. She was married in 2005 and moved in to a home with her husband's extended family. Her husband worked for a U.S. Army security company inside Iraq, so she often went extended periods of time without seeing him. Afrah describes her husband's family home as a "controlling"

environment with little freedom to do or be as she pleased. Consequently, though her narrative reflects more traditional ideas of women as domestic laborers and caregivers, she also has found great freedom in her life in the United States.

I graduated in 2001, I left college and I got married in 2005...After I finished college, I studied law. I stayed at home. I lived with my husband's relatives and the children... I saw my husband once a week because he worked with a US army security company, so I stayed with my husband's family to help them. Sometimes I would go shopping to very close shops and I stayed with my kids all of the time.

Asked what she wanted for her life in the United States:

I wish to continue to learn English and go to school and study to be a Social Worker, for me. I wish that my husband could continue to study here and get a degree and support my kids well....Here in America success means that you are doing something— living, especially for the woman. In Iraq time doesn't mean anything for the woman, even if she doesn't look at the clock, because she cannot do what she wants to do. Here in America she can take care of the house and then do what she wants to do to make her a successful person.

I feel pretty good about all of these things, but there is one problem. I have been told that my children will only receive daycare for two months.¹ I want to study, but they have plans for me to work and I will not be able to pay for the daycare and go to school and work.

Asked if her life was better or worse in the United States:

I feel that my life has gotten better because I was living with my husband's family and there was only one room for my family, here I have my own apartment. I am able to have my own personality now, my own house, my own work. In Iraq the husband's family controls the wife, tells her what to cook.

Afrah went on to describe that had her family stayed in Iraq, she was certain her husband would never have been able to afford a house. Consequently, their move to the United States freed her from the confines of her husbands' family home. Though, much like Inaya, Afrah clearly defines “taking care of the house” and children as a woman's role, she is elated to find independence and freedom over her “own house,” her “own

¹ I was never able to find out the details of this situation.

work,” in the United States. Indeed, she goes as far as to suggest that by immigrating to a new country, she is able to realize and express a sense of individual identity, hidden in the confines of her husband’s family home. As she states, “I am able to have my own personality now.”

Yet, Afrah’s narrative also shares a distinct similarity to Inaya’s. Though not expressing anger in the interview, Afrah suggests that working for pay is not her choice; rather, as she expresses “*they* (the refugee agency) *have plans for me to work.*” Much like Segura’s description of Chicana nonemployed mothers and supportive of Read’s findings on first generation Arab-American women’s approach to employment, Inaya and Afrah embrace a construction of motherhood that “means staying home with children...idealized with their community...and society at large” (Segura 2007: 375). Having internalized a gendered “separate spheres ideology,” dichotomizing work in the public domain and motherhood in the private, for the women in this group employment was contradictory to their traditional identification as women and mothers. Yet both negotiated this contradiction through the needs of their children and their roles in fulfilling those needs.

Conclusion

As these narratives illustrate, the refugee women interviewed in this study offer diverse and complicated understandings of the intersection of employment and motherhood. Though wage labor was a new role for some of the respondents, many had a long history of paid work in their countries of origin. As such, for the majority of the participants, employment was consistent with their roles as mothers and wives prior to

resettlement. Accordingly, their frustrations were not in the need to work, but rather in the lack of opportunities or the barriers faced in finding jobs. Conversely, for the two respondents with a negative view of employment, wage labor was contradictory to their social position as wives and mothers. For these women, employment was not their choice. Rather, both suggest that migrating to the U.S. led to a negative change in their families' social and economic status compelling them into the workforce.

As these narratives demonstrate, refugee women's experiences of resettlement, views on employment, and constructions of motherhood are hardly universal. Indeed, the women's voices in this work illustrate that women's experiences of displacement and resettlement are as diverse as the women themselves. Yet, the complexities of women's experiences are rarely incorporated into refugee services. As I will discuss at length in chapter three, the Family Center, KRM and the larger U.S. refugee resettlement process continue to essentialize refugee women's experiences and identities, particularly in regards to employment and motherhood. As I have argued in this chapter, the scholarship and an aid discourse that positions refugee women's employment as "supplementary" to male income is based on assumed social constructions of gender inconsistent with many refugee women's experiences both before and after resettlement. The desire to work or not to work varied amongst the women in this study. In turn, many of my respondents described their roles as mothers, wives, and housekeepers as consistent with, rather than contradictory to paid employment. Indeed, for many of the women in this study, the idea of being a "good" mother was intrinsically tied to being a financial provider. Likewise, though both women with a "negative" view of paid work were Iraqi, I hesitate to generalize women's constructions of motherhood and employment along cultural or

ethnic lines. Indeed, Nadia, who belongs to the same extended family as Inaya, had very different views than her sister-in-law. As such, the varied and, at times, divisive ideas expressed in these narratives illustrate the importance of incorporating women's voices into refugee services.

I conclude this chapter by returning to Nadia's narrative. With each interview, I ended by asking the narrator what advice she would offer to a woman from her country of origin immigrating to Kentucky. As one woman speaking to another, Nadia's answer is an elegant illustration of the vital role of employment in many refugee women's lives.

I would tell her, you will be disappointed at the beginning. But don't give up, and don't think about going back. It will be hard to find a job but you will find one. And when you find it, your life will be good.

CHAPTER III

THE FAMILY CENTER

In this chapter, I examine the Family Center as a space of intervention for refugee women. In the first section, I discuss successful elements of the Center. The Center meets three specific needs described by the participants in their narratives: free childcare, peer group development, and education. In the second section of this chapter, I will discuss areas for improvement to the Center programs. These “missed opportunities” include: 1) a failure to connect the Family Center with the larger agency services including case-management and cultural orientation and 2) a lack of job-orientation programming, including work-skills curriculum. I contend that these issues are derived from a gendered essentialization of refugee women as primary caregivers and secondary income providers in their families. In the final section of this chapter, I offer conclusions to my research and make recommendations for policy changes. Though my analysis focuses on the Family Center program of Kentucky Refugee Ministries, my recommendations could also apply to groups similar to KRM working in refugee resettlement throughout the U.S. I conclude that while it has shortcomings, the Family Center offers vital services to newcomer refugee women and in some respects could be utilized as a model program for resettlement agencies throughout the country.

Childcare

The Family Center operates in five rooms rented from the Highlands Baptist Church, located two blocks east of the KRM administrative offices and main ESL program, and is open three days per week on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays from 9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Two staff members run the program: Megan, the English teacher, and Lauren, the Family Center and Early Childhood coordinator. Though they coordinate their efforts, Megan and Lauren are fairly autonomous in their duties, with Megan overseeing the English program and Lauren the childcare center. In addition, the Center employs at any given time three former Center participants as childcare workers.¹ The childcare program also relies heavily on a small group of dedicated volunteers to provide the appropriate amount of adult supervision. As the childcare center is not a licensed daycare, the mothers are required to remain on the property when their children are present.

The childcare center is divided into three age groups: infants, toddlers (up to three years old), and preschool. During the adult class time, staff and volunteers care for the children, allowing the mothers to have uninterrupted language instruction. For the younger ages, this time is largely spent in play. The preschool class is slightly more structured, with educational activities, reading, and group play. During break times, breast-feeding mothers are given the opportunity to feed their children if they see fit. Mothers that do not breast-feed are asked not to visit their children, as the separation at the conclusion of the break tends to upset the children, causing disruption for the remainder of the morning. Because the Family Center is the first time these children have been separated from their parents for an extended period, it can be quite traumatic

¹ Inaya was starting in this position at the time of our interview.

for the children, particularly during their first few weeks of attendance. I volunteered for only a few days in the childcare center and the patience and comfort provided by the childcare staff and volunteers is praiseworthy.

The childcare portion of the Family Center is an ingenious and vital service provided by KRM. Given their limited financial assistance, newcomer refugee families cannot afford daycare. Because the application process is quite lengthy and case-management resources are limited, it may take anywhere from four to eight months for these families to qualify for state daycare assistance.² Consequently, without free childcare, for any family with a child under the age of five, one parent would be required to stay home with this child, and would, thus, not be able to attend ESL classes.

Not only is language acquisition a critical aspect of an individual's employability, KRM also requires ESL attendance in order to receive case-management and employment services. A parent with full-time childcare responsibilities is exempt from these requirements until they have daycare. Without the Family Center, the primary caregiver for a young child would not be able to begin English courses for many months after his/her arrival, creating further barriers to finding employment. Consequently, the Family Center provides a critical service, giving both parents the opportunity to receive English language instruction from the day of their arrival. I should note that the financial assistance KRM receives through government allowances does not fund the Family Center. As a "supplementary" service, individual grants fund this program. I will revisit this point in latter sections of this chapter, but childcare for refugee newcomers is hardly a "supplementary" need and, therefore, should be fully funded by federal initiatives.

² See the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, <http://chfs.ky.gov/dcbs/dcc/apply.html>.

Peer Group Development

When I discussed the childcare program with the participants during our interviews, many respondents indicated another benefit as well. As Nadia explained,

The children always keep bothering me. The only time I rest from them is here. Mohammed, the boy, he doesn't know how to sit. Only when we eat, does he sit. And sometimes he eats standing up. And my daughter only wants me to carry her. If I put her down, she will cry. Here, I have friends.

Nadia's statement, "here, I have friends," suggests another important function of the Family Center for newcomer women. In her recent account of refugee women's negotiation of employment in the United Kingdom, Frances Tomlinson (2010) suggests that refugee women use gender as a marker to locate their individual experiences within shared experiences; she writes, "gender is separated from race to assert a commonality of interest amongst women with the effect of reducing, rather than amplifying otherness" (285). Similarly, the Family Center operates as a gendered social space where the participants are able to form peer groups of women bridging ethnic and racial boundaries. As Maria discussed in her narrative, though she was the only Cuban woman in the program, her relationship with "the other ladies from Nepal," was of great importance.

I have argued that refugee women face intersections of marginalization both as women and as refugees. Though operating as a space of intervention, the Family Center is also a rare social space where women refugees exist in the center of the institution rather than on its periphery. In the Family Center, the participants give primacy to their collective identities as women and mothers. Thus, the Center becomes a safe space in which they are insiders rather than marginalized others.

This function of the Family Center as a gendered, social space became particularly clear one day in November during a vocabulary lesson involving parts of the body and colors. In the lesson, Megan used the women in the room to show examples of different hair colors. As far as we could see none of the women had red hair. Afrah, who wears a traditional Muslim headscarf, noted that her hair was red and proceeded to remove her scarf to show the other women. Though many of the other participants were non-Muslim, for Afrah, the Family Center was clearly a women's space, rooted in gender rather than ethnic or cultural difference.

Education

The women's identification with their shared experiences was particularly salient in the Center's art therapy program. For three weeks at the start of my research Amy, an art therapist, would visit the class each Tuesday. As English proficiency greatly varied amongst the participants, the Family Center had implemented the art therapy program in order to give the women another means of expressing themselves outside of verbal language. The women in the program consistently looked forward to Amy's arrival and always enthusiastically participated in her lessons.

Amy and Megan coordinated their curriculum, reinforcing the vocabulary taught in the regular Family Center classes. For example, the week after Megan's lesson on cooking words, Amy asked each woman to use construction paper to create a mosaic of their favorite foods. Each art therapy lesson would involve independent work, followed by a discussion of each woman's product. These discussions were often quite long and, as a researcher, offered great insight into the participant's experiences.

The importance of art therapy in creating a safe, social space for the participants was particularly salient one Tuesday when Amy brought in watercolors and asked the women to paint the homes they had left behind in coming to Kentucky. In my field notes that day, I recorded the following:

Normally full of noise and conversation, today the room was silent as the women engaged with memories of their former homes. They were concentrating, making every detail as accurate as possible. Instead of walking amongst them as she normally does, Amy seemed to take a cue from their intensity and sat quietly at the front of the room letting them work. I painted New York, my place of birth. When they were finished, Amy asked each woman to show their work to the class and to describe their homes as best as they could. She laid a map in the center of the table and had them connect their paintings to their home country with a string. She photographed the collage for the Center. After describing her home to us, a beautiful farmscape filled with greenery and animals, Rama cried. She touched her heart and said, "I miss it." Many women nodded and seemed to understand her sentiment despite the language barrier.

As the example above illustrates, art therapy was often cathartic and provided a method for the participants to share their collective and diverse experiences of forced migration and resettlement. Shortly after I began my research, Amy stopped attending the program. When I asked about her absence, Megan explained that the Center had lost the art therapy funding. I will return to conversation on funding in the final section of this chapter, but art therapy was certainly a great loss to the Center's programming.

One day in September, I arrived to the Center early and found Megan, the English teacher, slicing cherry tomatoes in half. On the front table, nearest to the dry-erase board, she had laid out a variety of vegetables, olive oil, feta cheese, and a large bowl of cooked pasta. Megan explained that the vocabulary lesson that day would be verbs used when cooking. To explain each action, she was going to prepare a cold pasta salad, which we

would share as snack during the break. During the second half of the class, Megan planned to have the women write their own recipes to share with one another.

My field notes from that day were as follows:

Excellent lesson. The women seemed to thoroughly enjoy class today and comprehend the new vocabulary. Saw women from all groups writing words in their native language next to the English vocabulary. Individual recipe writing was impressive. Afrah asked if I could find her an English cookbook. Must remember to bring one next week. Cold pasta salad, not a big hit (smile).

One of the great strengths of the Family Center English program is the instructor's consistent utilization of the women's daily-lived experiences in the Center curriculum. Though the focus is on English language acquisition, lessons center upon direct experiences and needs for newcomer women. During my four months of observation vocabulary lessons included themes of: cooking, city transportation, health and wellness, personal hygiene, school, household chores, cold weather clothing, holidays and home safety.

The Family Center: Missed Opportunities

Often these lessons became the catalyst for and the tools by which the participants could discuss needs and concerns surrounding specific issues. As I alluded to in the introduction of this work, during the lesson on home safety, Megan provided a worksheet on proper and improper methods for heating one's home. After studying the sheet, Bina very quietly mentioned that her home was quite cold. When Megan and I asked her to explain, we discovered that two of her living-room windows had no glass and were instead covered in plastic sheets. She stated that the windows had been in that condition for months.

I asked if she would allow me to contact her case-manager to discuss the issue and, when she agreed, I phoned the KRM administrative office. When I spoke with the case-manager, she was concerned and agreed to contact the apartment manager that morning. I followed up with the case-manager at a later date to confirm that the windows had been fixed. During our conversation, she shook her head and said that she saw Bina's husband almost every day; she simply couldn't believe that he had never mentioned the windows to her. The case-manager acted with immediacy to solve the problem. Yet, had Bina not raised the issue in the class, it is likely that the family would have suffered through the winter in an unsafe home environment.

For reasons unknown, Bina's husband had chosen not to tell the family's case-manager about the broken windows. Yet, perhaps promoted by the lesson on home heating, Bina was able to articulate the issue and ask for help. I had many comparable conversations throughout my four months at the Center and made many referrals to Megan or phone calls to the KRM case-management team.

Frequently, the women in the center could not articulate the name of their case-manger. In October, I conducted an informal survey of the women in the Center asking if they knew the name of their caseworker or case-manager. I was shocked to discover, of the fifteen women in class that day, only five were able to name a specific individual. I certainly do not wish to imply that KRM's case management services are inadequate. Indeed, I believe they offer a strong organizational model given the limited resources available for refugee resettlement. Rather, I argue that, as in Bina's case, the majority of services are conducted through the male "head of household."

Bina's story is just one example of a regular occurrence in the Family Center. Megan and Lauren often act as messengers between the case-management staff and the women in the program. When issues arise for the women or their children, they naturally communicate these problems to the individuals most available to them. This direct access to staff is yet another vital intervention provided by the Family Center. In turn, as Lauren is able to interact with the women's children on a weekly basis, she is able to mitigate concerns over health, hygiene, proper clothing for cold weather, or dietary issues without delay. As the women came to associate me with the other American staff members, I was habitually told about problems they were experiencing ranging from sleeplessness, food stamps issues, warm clothing for themselves and their children, and, most prevalently, fears over paying rent. Indeed, nine out of thirteen women expressed a question or concern regarding rent during our interview. Given their permission, I would communicate these problems to Megan who would follow up with a case-management staff member at KRM.³

As Megan and Lauren are frontline staff in the Family Center it is certainly understandable that the participants would approach them with their concerns. Yet, often Megan and Lauren are not familiar with the details of the family's case and have little power to address issues. Their role is, thus, to communicate problems to case-management staff. In the scope of this research, I cannot accurately assert how well each individual issue was addressed through this system. I can only anecdotally suggest that this nuance of responsibilities, dividing case-management from Family Center staff, is not clear to the women in the program. Consequently, the participants frequently expressed frustration at what they perceive to be an inconsistency of services.

³ As I have discussed, in rare instances, I would contact the women's caseworker directly.

I suggest that this disjunction between case-management at the Family Center is problematic. As the Center is geographically separated from the administrative office, throughout my research, I only noted external KRM staff in the Center on five occasions. In only one instance was this staff member a part of the case-management team. The other four were health and sponsorship staff. On all occasions, the external staff was present to remove one of the participants from class for an appointment or discussion. In my four months at the Center, I never observed an external KRM staff member in the classroom with the participants.

This lack of connection between the Family Center and larger agency services is both a missed opportunity for intervention and a reflection of the gendered nature of refugee aid. Though the frontline staff at the Family Center will always play a vital role in addressing the participants' concerns and problems, I suggest weekly visits to the Center by one case-management staff member to facilitate greater communication between the two programs and expedite intervention when necessary. Yet, refugee aid organizations, including KRM, must also explore the gender biases dictating the nature of their services and programs. Logistically, the men in these families are more likely to attend English classes five days per week in the KRM administration building and are therefore, more geographically accessible to case-management staff. Yet, the simple fact that men are routed into the mainstream ESL program, while the women are relegated to the Family Center program reflects a false assumption about the universality of men and women's roles in these families. As many of the women's narratives illustrate, childcare is often a shared responsibility between both husbands and wives, specifically for the Karen population. If the Family Center cannot be funded to support a full week of

classes, one option for correcting this bias would be to allow the families the opportunity to freely choose who will attend mainstream ESL and who will participate in the Center programs. Though it is likely that the Family Center would remain predominately female, the autonomy granted in allowing families to define their roles would be a great advancement in the promotion of gender equality through resettlement programs. Yet, as I have described above, the gendered social space of the Family Center offers great benefits to the participants, particularly through peer-group development. Consequently, as I will discuss in length below, the best solution is to correct the discrepancies in the programs by relocating the Family Center on-site with the mainstream ESL program and by funding the Center for a full week of classes.

Gender and Resettlement

Newcomer families are burdened with extensive medical and social services appointments during their first months of resettlement. As Myo expresses in her narrative, the burden of these appointments and the responsibility to care for sick children largely falls to the women in the program. When I asked if she thought of the Family Center, Myo replied:

Yes. Yes. I like the Family Center because I have many appointments. So Family Center is good for me because Wednesday I have appointments, Friday I have appointments. So it's good for me. Maybe when I go to the KRM ESL, maybe its hard for me because my family, many appointments.

The Family Center excuses absences if a participant is attending a scheduled medical or social services appointment or if she is home with a sick child. Yet, should the father stay home to fulfill these responsibilities and thereby miss English classes at KRM, this absence would likely not be excused. As I have mentioned above, ESL attendance is

directly tied to the family's case-management and employment assistance. Consequently, these policies not only assume a specific social construction of gender, they prohibit any subversion of gender roles. Due to the gendered division of the English language programs, the women in the Family Center must assume the vast majority of domestic labor.

Yet, other than the Iraqi population, all of the women in the program indicated a sharing of domestic duties and childcare with their male partners. Consequently, it is false to suggest that this gendered division of responsibility merely reflects the participants' accepted gender roles prior to their arrivals in the United States. Rather, I argue that KRM policies create and reinforce women's position as subjugated to their male partners, as primary caregivers, and as supplementary rather than primary financial providers.

The fundamental problem is not that women are primary caregivers or perform their gender through domestic duties. Certainly, some of the participants in this study would claim both roles proudly. Nor, as I have discussed above, does the problem lie in the single-gendered environment of the Family Center. Rather, as Frances Tomlinson suggests, aid organizations promote the marginalization of refugee women through a discourse of gender inequality, "indicating not only gender and placement in a category replete with political overtones, but also a position as 'not from here,'" (Tomlinson 2010: 282). Thus, the problem occurs in the essentialization of all refugee women into an identity of gendered "otherness" overlooking the impact of local and specific cultural, social, and familial identifications on each individual's social constructions of gender. This point is greatly illustrated in the lack of employment orientation and work-skill

curriculum taught in the Family Center program. As I have discussed at length in chapter two, the majority of the participants expressed a desire to work in their narratives. The need to work was universal. Yet, very little time in the Family Center is dedicated to employment-oriented programming.

When I first began my research, Megan was completing a program entitled, “World of Work.” This work orientation program is KRM’s solution to a required employment orientation for resettlement agencies. Yet, this bureaucratic and pedantic curriculum offers little usable knowledge or skills for any future worker, including the Family Center participants. For example, during her final lesson Megan was attempting to explain the intricacies of employer health and retirement benefits. Though interpreters were present for this series of four lessons, the confusion in the room was tangible. Fundamental skills such as completing work applications or interviewing are entirely missing from the program.

As the scope of this research did not bring me into the mainstream ESL classrooms, I cannot give a direct comparison between the two programs. Yet, in her narrative Amita points to one direct inequity between the Center and KRM ESL. The Family Center does not have access to computers. Conversely, KRM has a computer lab, available to the ESL students. As the women in the Center must remain on the property when their children are present, they have very little if any opportunity to access this lab. In an age where computer skills are paramount to employment and advancement, this discrepancy between the programs places the women in the Center at an unjustifiable disadvantage. As Amita reminds us, *“We can get jobs. But we are not getting any opportunity.”*

Conclusions

The Family Center program offers many vital services to newcomer refugee women and in many respects offers a usable model for resettlement agencies throughout the country. As a gendered, social space, the Family Center offers a unique environment where the participants exist in center of the institution rather than on its margins. This single-gender environment not only creates safe space but also raises consciousness through an open exchange of women's experiences of resettlement. In addition, free childcare is invaluable for refugee families with young children during their first months after arrival. For breast-feeding mothers specifically, on-site daycare services provide them with the opportunity to receive critical English instruction immediately after arrival, increasing the possibility for successful future employment. Weekly access to staff and lessons rooted in daily-lived experiences provide refugee women with the means and tools for communicating concerns or issues faced by their families. This direct communication allows for more consistent intervention when problems arise.

Nonetheless, as I have indicated, the Family Center model has many flaws. I have argued that these failings are derived from false gendered and essentialist understanding of refugee women's experiences, specifically regarding ideas of employment and motherhood. Yet, as I have shown in chapter two, the participants in this study are hardly a monolithic group. Rather, their narratives suggest diverse experiences, desires, and needs. Most importantly, these narratives illustrate the critical need for refugee aid organizations to incorporate women's voices into their discourse.

To this end, I do not suggest a completely de-gendered policy framework for refugee women. Rather it is critical that we acknowledge that these women often do have

distinct concerns including primary care for young children, domestic responsibilities, and, for some, experiences of gender-based violence. The question, thus, is not how to universalize policies. Rather, how do we shape services that recognize gender difference but do not reify subordinate roles for women?

First, programs for families with young children, such as the Family Center, must be integrated and fully funded by government resettlement initiatives. It is entirely discriminatory that women with young children wait months after resettlement to receive daycare and begin ESL classes. In turn, it is not acceptable that agencies aware of this discrimination, such as KRM, are forced to seek out supplementary and inconsistent funding in order to bridge this gap in services. The inequities and organizational failures of state childcare assistance programs are certainly a part of this larger dialogue. Yet, it remains the responsibility the U.S. refugee resettlement program to ensure that no legally admitted refugee be excluded from full participation in case-management, employment, or English language services regardless of his/her gender or parental status.

Consequently, programs such as the Family Center must be funded in full to support comprehensive ESL and employment classes and on-site childcare. In turn, these programs must also be equitable in length and content with the mainstream ESL courses. For KRM specifically, the women in the Center must be given computer access and English lessons five days per week. In turn, the benefits of a gendered, social space for refugee women should not be relinquished for a de-gendered or “neutral” approach to newcomer services. Rather, programs should continue to incorporate women’s daily-lives experiences, therapeutic curriculum, such as the Center’s art program, and

opportunities for participants to discuss and find commonality in their shared experiences.

Secondly, refugee agencies must redefine how they construct employment readiness programs and the gender biases dictating current practices. Certainly, any inequities between programs and access to tools, such as computers, must be rectified. In addition, as Myo describes, refugee women often spend extensive amounts of time completing social services, school-related, and medical appointments with their children. Yet, what agencies such as KRM fail to realize is that this “domestic” activity is an excellent source of job-readiness skill building. To attend appointments, refugees must become familiar with public transportation frequently visiting diverse areas of a city. Being able to navigate maps, timetables, and arrive at a destination on schedule is a critical skill for individuals entering into the workforce. In turn, navigating difficult social service networks and medical institutions, while articulating one’s needs and concerns, builds English communications skills furthering a refugee’s employability. Ironically, as I have described, these appointments are often constructed as domestic responsibility and are, thus, relegated to refugee women while men remain in the ESL classroom. I suggest both men and women refugees would be best served if these appointments were divided evenly between both adults. Consequently, refugee agencies, including KRM, must excuse absences for medical social services appointments for all participants regardless of gender. In the interim, refugee women remain bastions of employable knowledge and skills. I suggest these skills be utilized for the speedy and successful acquisition of employment for refugee women who wish to work.

Finally, refugee agencies must seek out and incorporate the voices, experiences, and knowledge of refugee women into their aid discourse and services. As I discussed at the beginning of this work, feminist theorists remind us that the establishment of “who” is a knower and whose knowledge is validated speaks directly to structures of social power and privilege, while subsequently denying the voices and experiences of oppressed groups. I have argued that U.S. refugees service programs continue to reflect an unexamined and false androcentric worldview, consciously or unconsciously silencing the voices of refugee women. As such, both local and national bodies must actively redefine who they view as a “knower,” and seek to develop knowledge from the standpoint of those on the margins.

The narratives captured in this work illustrate the complexity of refugee women’s experiences of resettlement. In turn, through a qualitative and feminist approach, this research adds the voices of refugee women from diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, hitherto largely absent in the academic discourse on immigrant women’s employment and mothering. Though refugee women experience double marginalization as women subordinated in patriarchy, and as refugees, bound in a discourse that constructs them as objects in need of intervention, this marginalization is neither fixed nor bound. The women in this study are not vulnerable and passive victims, but rather active participants, willing and ready to contribute to their new communities. Resettlement agencies must seize on the opportunity to involve refugee women as agents of change and a community of resourceful actors. As a former refugee case manager, I look back with regret at my contribution to the silencing of newcomer women. Let my

experiences and the narratives contained in this work propel those involved in refugee programs toward a future where refugee women's voices guide their resettlement.

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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS

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To: Christopher, Karen
From: The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Date: Friday, August 13, 2010
Subject: Approval Letter

Tracking #: 10.0326
Title: Explorations of Gender in Refugee Personal Narratives.
Approval Date: 8/11/2010 12:00:00 AM
Expiration Date: 8/10/2011 12:00:00 AM

The revised document(s) for the above referenced study have been received and contain the changes requested in our letter of 7/15/2010. This study was reviewed on 8/11/2010 by the chair/vice chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved through the Expedited Review Procedure, according to 45 CFR 46.110(b), since this study falls under Expedited Category (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The following items have been approved:

- Research Protocol, not dated
- Informed Consent (English), dated 5/15/2010
- Informed Consent (Arabic), dated 5/15/2010
- Informed Consent (Bhutanese), not dated
- Informed Consent (Spanish), not dated

This study now has final IRB approval from 8/11/2010 through 8/10/2011. You should complete and return the Progress Report/Continuation Request Form EIGHT weeks prior to this date in order to ensure that no lapse in approval occurs. The committee will be advised of this action at their next full board meeting.

Site Approval

If this study will take place at an affiliated research institution, such as Jewish Hospital/St Marys Hospital, Norton Healthcare, or University of Louisville Hospital, permission to use the site of the affiliated institution may be necessary before the research may begin. If this study will take place outside of the University of Louisville Campuses, permission from the organization should be obtained before the research may begin. Failure to obtain this permission may result in a delay in the start of your research.

Privacy & Encryption Statement

The University of Louisville's Privacy and Encryption Policy requires such information as identifiable medical and health records; credit card, bank account and other personal financial information; social security numbers; proprietary research data; dates of birth (when combined with name, address and/or phone numbers) to be encrypted. For additional information: <http://security.louisville.edu/PolStds/ISO/PS018.htm>.

1099 Information (If Applicable)

As a reminder, in compliance with University policies and Internal Revenue Service code, all payments (including checks, gift cards, and gift certificates) to research subjects must be reported to the University Controller's Office. Petty Cash payments must also be monitored by the issuing department and reported to the Controller's Office. Before issuing compensation, each research subject must complete a W-9 form. For additional information, please contact the Controller's Office at 852-8237 or controll@louisville.edu.

The following is a NEW link to an Instruction Sheet for BRAAN2 "How to Locate Stamped/Approved Documents in BRAAN2":

<http://louisville.edu/research/braan2/help/ApprovedDocs.pdf/view>

Please begin using your newly approved (stamped) document(s) at this time. The previous versions are no longer valid. If you need assistance in accessing any of the study documents, please feel free to contact our office at (502) 852-5188. You may also email our service account at hsppofc@gwise.louisville.edu for assistance.

Best wishes for a successful study. If you have any questions please contact the HSPPPO at (502) 852-5188 or hsppofc@louisville.edu.

Thank you.

Board Designee: Leitsch, Patricia

Once you begin your human subject research the following regulations apply:

1. Unanticipated problems or serious adverse events encountered in this research study must be reported to the IRB within five (5) work days.
2. Any modifications to the study protocol or informed consent form must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. You may not use a modified informed consent form until it has been approved and validated by the IRB.
4. Please note that the IRB operates in accordance with laws and regulations of the United States and guidance provided by the Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and other Federal and State Agencies when applicable.
5. You should complete and SUBMIT the Continuation Request Form eight weeks prior to this date in order to ensure that no lapse in approval occurs.

Letter Sent By: Perkins, Erin, 8/12/2010 10:35 AM

*Full Accreditation since June 2005 by the Association for the Accreditation of
Human Research Protection Programs, Inc.*

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