

INTRODUCTION

Re-settlement as an immigrant or refugee is about starting over; adopting new occupations while retaining occupations and ways of doing that are familiar and culturally bound to one's country of origin and identity². Successful transition is assessed by the ability to adapt to new cultural expectations, norms, and assume daily activities informed by new socio-cultural context. This process of adjustment is an interaction between the knowledge, values, and sense of self prior to resettlement and the demands new socio-cultural⁴. Critical to their adjustment was the ability to balance new occupations while continuing to keep and modify many former roles and routines.⁴ New occupations are adopted, former occupations are modified and retained, or relinquished because they are perceived as unacceptable or not required. Similarly, the ways of performing occupations may change.

PURPOSE

This study explored how immigrant and refugee women in an urban setting adapt and integrate into a society through an examination of how their daily occupations are retained, reconfigured or relinquished.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

- Examine how immigrant and refugee women adjustment and transition is expressed through their occupations (purposive activities)
- Examine how women's roles, i.e., homemaker, housewife, caregiver, change during the transition process as expressed in the day to day activities
- Explore how women find balance in maintaining meaningful cultural occupations and necessary new occupations

METHODOLOGY

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with guiding questions relating to family life, work, education, and culture.
- Interviews ranged for 45 minutes to one hour, and participants completed a demographic survey.
- Eight women of immigrant or refugee status, living in the greater Toronto area, were interviewed for this study (4 - India, 1 - Philippines, 1 - Tibet via India, 1 - Iraq, and 1 - Hungary/Hungarian Roma).
- Two of eight women were employed, four were homemakers, and two caretakers of sick children.
- Participants were married or in a domestic partnership, with children.
- Content analysis: Four themes emerged from the analysis, indicating two participant cohorts, those who were immigrants and those who were refugees. The cohort shared the overarching themes but the narratives distinguished them from each other.

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Exploring the Importance and Role of Meaningful Occupations in Adjustment

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FINDINGS: IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Five women from India and the Philippines. None are receiving public assistance.

Volition

A central theme was associated with personal causation in choosing to immigrate. There was a sense of agency in deciding to leave one's country of origin, which was at times ambiguous for the four women from India, because it was their husbands who received work visas. The strongest sense of agency was seen in the woman from the Philippines who had a work visa.

Loss of Status and Identity

Women struggled with the loss of sense of self that had been associated with worker /careers prior to immigrating. The loss of the worker role had both economic and social adjustment implications. Each woman had a career before moving to Canada, e.g., software engineers, biotechnologist. After coming to Canada, all struggled to find a job or were ineligible for work visa. When work was obtained, they were underemployed in survival jobs e.g., service workers at McDonalds and Sears.

Doing and Belonging in Context

Doing culturally bounded occupations was difficult e.g., women struggled with finding ingredients to cook familiar meals. At the same time, engaging in new activities, especially social activities to forge a sense of belonging, was equally challenging.

Role in Family/Household

Transition resulted in changes in household roles, activities, and routines. The shift from intergenerational households/social networks to nuclear families lead to a sense of isolation. Where family members would have once provided childcare and support, women now had sole caretaker roles. Domestic and home maintenance activities that were performed by others and may have been distasteful for their socio-economic status in their country, were now routine activities.

We resigned. Both of us resigned. We were going to move to Canada, for greener pasture.- reason for the move

I studied so much and all my qualifications was just going to waste. I mean, I'm not working. I'm not doing anything. - biotechnologist to having no job

Since I was working over there and coming here, I have to stay at home. That was a little difficult. Being home all the time, doing nothing. To be alone. - on activities in new country

I never did dishes before ever in my life and cleaning the toilet. I still don't do that, my husband does clean the toilet. But no one ever cleans the toilet or does washing, the floor. Here you have to be a handyman. - on not being able to afford help

FINDINGS: REFUGEE WOMEN

Three women from Hungary, Iraq, and Tibet. All are receiving public assistance.

Volition

An absence of personal causation existed in the narratives of refugee women. Marginalization, safety concerns, and lack of belonging associated with being diaspora underpinned the decision to leave country of origin. Re-settlement was framed as opportunities for self, for children, and for a better future.

Loss of Status and Identity

Women's expectations of a "better" life were not attained. Women experienced numerous losses; work, lifestyle, homes and meaningful occupations. With barriers of stigma, language, and lack of proper documentation, opportunities for self could not be achieved. This caused a shift in identity, as women began living their lives around the opportunities for their children rather than for their desired occupations.

Doing and Belonging in Context

Occupational deprivation was common with women of refugee status, due to the financial dependence and language barriers. Roles associated with work, family, and social participation were shifted due to the inability to obtain employment and transition out of public assistance.

Role in Family/Household

Immediate family is the source of stability and women expressed having children created their sense of purpose in building a new life. Dependence on welfare, language skills and education contributed to a lack of agency in choices for living situation and roles, especially mother's who are caretakers. Women put the future for their children and associated occupations before their own meaningful occupations that would have enhanced resettlement.

Here, if you go anywhere, everyone's equal, right? If you have money, don't have money, people are equal. - on being Tibetan and living in Canada

My future is my kids. - on her reason for staying in Canada

But, you have electric, you have water. You have good country. You feed. But still, you don't feel like you have peace. - on lack of acceptance and sense of community

Gypsies, they really all about the family. The close knit family - on living in Canada

CONCLUSION

Overarching themes were *volition, loss of status and identity, doing and belonging in a new context, and role in family/household*. For women of immigrant status, community networks and resources played a significant role in the adjustment process and ability to balance new and valued former occupations. Having an income enhanced capacity for occupational engagement and adaptation.

Women of refugee status lived in an extended state of transition due to barriers created by lack of proper documentation and language. What emerged in this group is a complex interaction of social and economic factors that resulted in occupational deprivation, even after years of living in Canada.

Implications: Building social networks around meaningful occupations associated with household and child rearing roles are a gateway to resettlement. Emphasis should be placed on occupational engagement that foster social participation around shared activities and skills that build economic independence and language acquisition. Occupational adaptation requires blending new and old occupations to facilitate a positive identity underpinned by agency that comes from choice

