Document généré le 1 jan. 2025 08:55

Refuge
Canada's Journal on Refugees
Revue canadienne sur les réfugiés

Grandmothers Behind the Scenes
Subordinate Integration, Care Work, and Power in Syrian Canadian Refugee Resettlement

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Volume 38, numéro 2, 2022

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1096461ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40937

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (imprimé)
1920-7336 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Kahil, R., Iqbal, M. & Maghbouleh, N. (2022). Grandmothers Behind the Scenes: Subordinate Integration, Care Work, and Power in Syrian Canadian Refugee Resettlement. *Refuge*, *38*(2), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40937

Résumé de l'article

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Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees / Refuge : revue canadienne sur les réfugiés
2022, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40937

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ABSTRACT

Research and policy concerning the Syrian Canadian diaspora has not prioritized elders. This article adds to scholarship about the well-being of newcomers admitted via the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative through a focus on grandmothers resettled within their multigenerational families. Using interviews and qualitative field research, we show how the authority and status these elder women once held in Syria may be undermined by their comparatively subordinate integration in Canada. Although new, post-migration configurations of power, care work, and community may present some opportunities, the burdens and dependencies of subordinate integration mostly constrain these elders from reclaiming their authority and status.

KEYWORDS

elder refugees; aging; subordinate integration; women; claimsmaking; mattering

RESUMÉ

La recherche et les politiques concernant la diaspora syrienne au Canada n'ont pas accordé la priorité aux aînés. Cet article contribue à la recherche sur le bien-être des nouveaux arrivants admis via l'Initiative de réinstallation des réfugiés syriens en mettant l'accent sur les grand-mères réinstallées chez leurs familles multigénérationnelles. À l'aide d'entrevues et d'une enquête de terrain qualitative, nous démontrons comment l'autorité et le statut autrefois détenus par ces aînées en Syrie peuvent être ébranlés par leur intégration relativement subordonnée au Canada. Bien que de nouvelles configurations post-migratoires de pouvoir, de travail de soin et de communauté puissent présenter certaines opportunités, les fardeaux et les dépendances de l'intégration subordonnée empêchent principalement ces aînées de récupérer leur autorité et leur statut.

KEYWORDS

réfugié.es âgé.es; vieillir; intégration subordonnés; femmes; revendication; compter

HISTORY Published 31 December 2022

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INTRODUCTION

A small, framed photograph hangs on the wall of a newcomer family's home on the outer edge of Toronto, Canada. At first glance, it appears to capture the happy wedding of two couples: two brides standing beside two grooms. Upon closer look, though, something seems peculiar about one of the brides: she has anxious, rebellious eyes, pressed lips, and a flushed face. The bride's name is Bassema,[1] and the photo marks the day, 15 years ago, that Bassema and her sister married two brothers in Syria. At the time of this observation, Bassema's own mother, Jihan, had just arrived in Canada and was living with Bassema and her family in a duplex. Bassema shared that Jihan had struck her face for refusing the marriage that day. Jihan did not dispute this, stating, "No girls of mine say no to me." Jihan expressed pride in her skills and power in arranging marriages, including those of her own daughters. She claimed that back in Syria, she was recognized as a successful matchmaker and was sought out by her community as a vital expert and resource. In the wake of war and forced migration, Jihan shared that she was re-establishing her vocation as matchmaker, only now as a refugee and a grandmother, among other Syrians—including her daughter Bassema—in Toronto.

Across town, another multigenerational Syrian family is reunited. Inside this apartment, three generations huddle tightly on a sofa. A baby dozes comfortably in his grandmother's arms. The baby's mother, Amina, snuggles happily next to her own mother, Zeynab, the more recent arrival to Canada. Zeynab, the grandmother, has an expression on her face that brims with excitement, hope, and eagerness. When Rula Kahil visited Amina at home, Zeynab excitedly took over the conversation. She explained she would build a future for herself and Amina in Canada. She declared that when the baby was old enough to attend daycare, mother and grandmother would return to school and learn English. Zeynab announced—perhaps more for Amina's benefit than for Rula's—that she came to Canada to advocate for her daughter and to take care of her grandson. Zeynab was also proud that she successfully brought her own mother, the baby's great-grandmother, to safety alongside them in this new world. Zeynab grieved that her other children, including two sons and their families, hadn't yet been able to get to Canada. But, however partial, four generations were together once again in Toronto. Zeynab, a matriarch proudly claimed by her kin, feels needed and valued.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Migrants aged 60 and older, like Jihan and Zeynab, who arrived in 2016 and 2018, respectively, make up less than 5% of the 44,625 Syrian refugees admitted to Canada under the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative (SRRI) (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2022). But the centrality and importance of elders and extended kin in multigenerational households is a strong feature of many societies from which immigrants to Canada hail, including the Arab world (Young & Shami, 1997; Rabiah-Mohammed et al., 2022). Despite their importance, the presence or absence of grandparents in the Syrian Canadian diaspora is under-examined, especially in the context of war, forced migration, and resettlement through programs like the SRRI, which prioritize younger migrants and nuclear (and heterosexual) families.

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[1] All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

This article contributes to emerging scholarship about the lives and well-being of Syrian Canadians admitted via the SRRI by examining the experiences of grandmothers resettled within their multigenerational families. For matriarchs in Arab societies such as Syria, to "claim" and be found "claimable" by kin or family is a primary platform through which care work, gender, and age-related identity roles are exercised (Joseph, 2012). Grandmothers, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, are also recognized by public health scholarship as "culturally designated and influential newborn advisors to young mothers, and direct caregivers [for their families (Aubel, 2021, p. 1). Less is known, however, about Syrian grandmothers' status and kin relations in settings like Canada, where multigenerational families may be differently reconfigured given post-migration changes to the household, including increased economic precarity and shifts in gendered and age-related power dynamics between family members. As noted by Bragg and Wong, there is also regrettably "scant" literature on how Canadian immigration policy affects the "work of grandparenting" (2016, p. 50). We therefore contribute a small-scale case study of two multigenerational refugee families in which one great-grandmother, two grandmothers, their children, and their grandchildren were resettled as part of the SRRI. This case is part of a larger research study that includes annual in-depth interviews conducted over three years with members of 53 Syrian newcomer households. We supplemented our interviews with in-person ethnographic observation in the family's homes and follow-ups with the grandmothers and their families via Zoom, voice notes, and text messages.[2]

We argue that the grandmothers in our study held a more secure status in Syria. They were matriarchs around whom the home and family revolved. Following the Syrian war, their displacement and forced migration upended these roles, and their identities as elder matriarchs within their families and new societies could no longer stay the same. Through attention to their self-reported sense of claimability and mattering within the context of their pre- and post-migration life histories, we show how these grandmothers understand their own authority and status as undermined in a Canadian integration system that resettles them into different and ultimately subordinate social positions in their younger family members' homes and into a society that, at large, allows their younger family members more agency. This case study is but one example of **subordinate integration**, a concept that describes the partial inclusion of certain newcomers into the economic, social, and political life of the receiving country. Those who experience **subordinate integration** may not necessarily experience downward assimilation: the integration of some immigrants into the underclass of their host country due to low levels of social and economic mobility. Yet, their integration into the host country is undermined, limited, or incomplete compared with other newcomers, co-ethnics, and even other family members due to the negative evaluation of their personhood or potentiality.

We show that since arriving in Canada, the grandmothers in our study could not replicate the matriarchal home that sustained their status and sense of control in Syria. Rather, subordinate integration and the difficulties of aging weakened the grandmothers' roles within the family and rendered them unable to make independent financial decisions or contributions. This is due, in part, to a Canadian policy context that understands elderly migrants as drains on social welfare and does not empower or support their autonomous activities. But it is also a reflection of how intergenerational power and solidarity relationships are changed through the process of migration.

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[2] In line with COVID-19 provincial guidelines in Ontario, our research team was required to pivot to remote-only forms of research and communication with participants starting on March 14, 2020.

How then do resettled Syrian grandmothers maintain a sense of power, mattering, and claimability when their forced migration and subordinate integration in a new Canadian setting may "erode the very basis of their claim?"[3] The grandmothers in our study do not passively accept their subordinate integration. Instead, they reorient their care work towards others in their co-ethnic community and personal family circles and resist being defined as burdens by settlement and social assistance agencies. Although matriarchal families exist across different conditions and settings, we suggest that the subordinate integration of these elder women in Canada mediates their former power as matriarchs. This heeds the call by feminist scholars to add to the "upsurge" in work on Arab women's public rights, identities, and political participation by also studying dynamic changes in family life (Johnson, 2018, p. 467; Taha, 2020) as well as to contribute to emerging knowledge in migration studies about Syrian resettlement in Canada (Hamilton et al., 2020; Hynie, 2018; Oudshoorn et al., 2020).

ARAB FAMILY STRUCTURE AND THE "KIN CONTRACT"

The "connectivity" of "intimate selves in Arab families," as articulated by anthropologist Suad Joseph, requires scholars based in the West to decentre taken-for-granted notions of the self for more relevant cultural conceptions whereby, in Arab families, identities are forged through a "psychodynamic process by which one person comes to see himself or herself as part of another" (Joseph, 1999, p. 121). Similarly, "the **family-centered** culture of non-EU migrants, which promotes **interdependence** [emphasis added] between family members, explains the importance migrant women attach to the presence of, and care by, their mothers" (Wyss & Nedelcu, 2020, p. 356). Such interdependence leaves "limited room for independence and privacy" within Arab families (Barakat, 1993, p. 106), and significant expectations and obligations to one another are held even across transnational distance, whether by choice or force of migration.

The centrality of family and kin is both a political and cultural frame: "The constitutions of most Arab countries state that the family, not the individual, is the basic unit of society" (Joseph, 1996, p. 16) and a major social structure (Harb, 2010). Being the "first form of socialization," Arab family members learn "at an early age to accept the traditionally established masculine cores of authority: kinship and religion" (Harb, 2010, p. 101). Yet, such notions of family and kinship rights also come with equivalent notions of responsibility and obligation. While Arab norms assign family power to men and oblige them to be financially responsible for their family, in the absence of elder men, age-based kinship values in the Arab world elevate elder women like grandmothers to matriarchs (Joseph, 1996). Arab grandmothers are therefore "privileged" in their status as family elders but also "constrained" by obligations to help raise their grandchildren (Joseph, 2000, p. 123). This web of relations has been described as a "kin contract," which includes "mothers' and fathers' unconditional sacrifices for their children, children's unwavering respect for their parents," and, importantly, "the love and care of [other family members] many steps removed" (Joseph, 2000, p. 116).

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[3] We thank sociologist Sylvia Fuller for sharing this phrase with us.

MIGRANT GRANDPARENTS AND CAREGIVING IN CANADA

In recent decades, Canada has retrenched funding for social welfare and caregiving support for children, elders, and people with disabilities (Cranford, 2020; Mathieu, 2019). Following neoliberal shifts in policy, such caregiving gaps are covered by unpaid family and kin labour, or what Deneva calls "welfare to kinfare" (2012, p. 118). This includes grandmothers, who are treated as "family savers" that enable parents, and especially mothers, to work outside the home in contexts where childcare is required (Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012, p. 27). Previous scholarship has analyzed the crucial caregiving role of grandmothers for the survival of transnational families in a time of economic globalization (Abrego, 2014; Baldassar, 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Brandhorst et al., 2020; Merla, 2012), including grandmothers who care for "left-behind" grandchildren as part of an "international division of reproductive labour" (Parreñas, 2015, p. 10; consult also Fan & Parreñas, 2018; King et al., 2014; Nedeclu & Wyss, 2020; Yarris, 2014) and "transnational aging carers" who migrate to and from their homelands to assist adult children with care obligations (Deneva, 2012, p. 105).

The grandmothers in our study are in a somewhat different situation: they are forced migrants who have been granted permanent residency and have resettled in Canada as refugees. Because the mobility of elders is typically constrained by human capital, health, and restrictionist migration policies, our case study is somewhat atypical. Indeed, migrant-receiving countries like Canada only maintain modest family reunification programs with a Parents and Grandparents Program (PGP) component. Canada's commitment to PGP is relatively weak and framed in a deficit model in which older newcomers pose net negative economic outcomes and require outsized social assistance (Bélanger & Candiz, 2020, p. 3474). As argued by Bragg and Wong, there exists a "popular discourse around the 'burden' of elderly immigrants on Canadian social service systems," which is a reflection of how "human-capital theory drives the immigration policy agenda in Canada" (2016, p. 49). Bragg and Wong document how a three-year moratorium on PGP family reunification (2011–2014) disproportionately burdened immigrant mothers and negatively impacted families' integration and belonging (consult Neysmith & Zhou, 2013).

Migrant grandparents who land in Canada typically live as financial dependents in their adult children's homes but significantly contribute to the household through unpaid home care and childcare for their grandchildren and the maintenance and preservation of cultural traditions and family solidarities (Milan et al., 2015; Neysmith & Zhou, 2013; Tyyskä, 2015). That grandparents' caregiving is necessary for family members' survival across national contexts yet also restricted or undermined by prevailing immigration policy is a contradiction that scholars have noted (Wyss & Nedeclu, 2020, p. 358; Zhou, 2018).

SYRIAN RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA (2015–PRESENT)

The unique SRRI that began in late 2015 represents a major undertaking or "national project" by the Canadian government and civil society, accomplished at a rapid speed and scale (for details, consult Bakardjieva, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020). Integration, defined as a two-way process of interaction and participation in all domains of social life for groups and individuals (Biles et al., 2008, p. 272), has been identified by policy-makers, academics, and other Canadian stakeholders as the preferred outcome to "confer the highest levels of psychological health and sociocultural adaptation" for newcomers (Wildschut et al., 2019, p. 1379). It follows, then, that an emerging body of research with SRRI newcomers attends to their integration- related experiences and outcomes (consult, for example, Hamilton et al., 2020, Kyriakides et al., 2018, Taha, 2020). We know less, however, about the experiences of older adults in this migration wave (Boutmira, 2021). The small subset of grandmothers in our study who were resettled through the SRRI thus offer a unique window into opportunities and constraints for older adult women who are resettled alongside their families.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The broader research study from which this article is drawn is a team-based project at the University of Toronto in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA): Refugee Integration, Stress, and Equity (RISE).[4] Toronto is a significant location for research on Syrian resettlement as nearly half of all SRRI newcomers to Canada were initially settled in Ontario, with the greatest proportion, nearly one in two, in Toronto (IRCC, 2019b). RISE began in 2016 as a two-wave interview pilot study of 41 Syrian mothers in their first 5 to 13 months of resettlement. The goal of the study was to explore identity- and stress-related changes among Syrian families. The project then expanded into a 2018–2023 longitudinal study also involving grandmothers and teenage children. The three faculty co-investigators identify as West Asian, white, and East Asian; most other team members are native Arabic speakers who identify as first-, 1.5-, and second-generation Arab Canadians and helped ensure the research design and interview protocol were linguistically and culturally appropriate.

Participants were recruited through three local settlement-related organizations. The full RISE sample (n = 148) reflects the participation of 53 households. All migrated to Canada through the SRRI program and arrived in the GTA between 2015 and 2018 as either government-assisted refugees (GARs,[5] roughly three quarters of the study sample), Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) refugees, or privately sponsored refugees.

This article develops a small-N case study from RISE data following Burawoy's "extended case method" (1998) and Small's theoretical and empirical justification for the utility of single cases to identify "social situations," including key types and relationships (2009, p. 20). Here, we focus on two elder women's evolving identities and shifting power dynamics in the context of their forced migration to Canada. Only 2 of 53 households were distinguished by the presence of grandmothers who arrived in Canada as GARs. In this way, we also draw on Fitzgerald's observation, citing Eckstein (1975), that successful studies in migration often prioritize "the logic of the crucial case" (2006, p. 14). Rula's curiosity about grandmothers "behind the scenes" was piqued when both grandmothers were present in their daughters' households during interviews; hence, early observations of grandmothers' presence in the family were spontaneous and inductive.

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[4] Human Subjects Approval protocol #00036436; further details about full study are available at http://www.RISETeam.ca.

[5] The Canadian government supports and grants GARs a one-year allowance (IRCC, 2019a), which they may use toward their rental housing. After the resettlement allowance period, GARs must rely on the social assistance income, which is insufficient for the existing housing market (Rabiah-Mohammed et al., 2022).

However, upon being invited to join the research study, both Jihan and Zeynab expressed keen interest to tell their stories to Rula as formal participants in the research enterprise, an age-related dynamic observed elsewhere (Bloemraad & Menjívar, 2022; Fukui & Menjívar, 2015). Thus, over three years, Rula interviewed, observed, and collected stories from both elder women. Three annual in-depth interviews with each grandmother were supplemented with participant observation in the grandmothers' homes and community. For example, at Jihan's request, Rula served as a translator for Jihan at a doctor's appointment, and Rula and Neda visited Zeynab after her cancer operation. Throughout the duration of the study, weekly text messages and phone calls were shared between Rula and the grandmothers. Zeynab regularly inquired about social assistance and updated Rula about struggles between her and other family members. After completion of the study, Rula corresponded regularly with both grandmothers and their daughters via voice notes and text messaging for two additional months. This qualitative engagement forms the core empirical basis of the article and is supplemented with interviews with Jihan's and Zeynab's younger family members.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into English from Arabic by research assistants. NVivo was used to organize and analyze interview transcripts, audio files, and field notes. The analysis involved two phases of coding: during the first phase, based on questions in the interview guide, key terms and concepts were flagged; during the second phase, emergent themes from the authors' ongoing conversations about the interviews were coded. Between phases, the authors' coding strategy informed follow-up with each grandmother throughout the analysis and write-up process.

In the next two sections, findings from the grandmothers' case studies are presented separately. The findings stem from self-reported experiences shared by the two grandmothers and their respective daughters about their pre-migration lives in Syria, including their social statuses and reputations, their displacement in Turkey, and resettlement in Canada. We note that although our observations and participants' narratives were counterchecked, whenever possible, against information provided by other family members, we are limited in our ability make strong or definitive claims from this data. Relatedly, the data presented here are largely from observations and annual interviews with respondents in their homes. We unfortunately cannot provide the thick description and perspectival lens on newcomer family psychosocial dynamics that an immersive ethnography could. After discussing each grandmother separately, we bring the cases of Jihan and Zeynab together to understand three themes in their narratives: how Arab migrant family dynamics around "claims-making" (Joseph, 2012) manifest in forced migration contexts; how grandmothers' identities, including their senses of mattering and control, are challenged by resettlement conditions; and how they navigate subordinate integration into Canadian society as refugee elder women.

TWO CASE STUDIES: JIHAN AND ZEYNAB

In many ways, Jihan and Zeynab are similar. Both are single mothers in their sixties, both raised eight children each, both hold little formal schooling, and both worked in Syria handling food. Jihan worked as a cook and Zeynab owned a grocery shop. Both described themselves as active community members with strong interpersonal skills that helped them build a rich social network and good reputation among others. They also described themselves as dedicated mothers and caretakers. Due to the Syrian war, their children and grandchildren are now dispersed across Asia, Europe, and North America, including some in Canada.

Jihan's Story

Jihan, a mother to seven daughters and one son, and grandmother to 24 grandchildren, arrived in Toronto in December 2016.[6] In Syria, Jihan worked as a cook for 35 years preparing "Syrian delicacies" for privileged families. She described having been a prominent matchmaker who leveraged her authority to match over "one hundred" couples back home, including some of her daughters, as described at the start of this article.[7] Jihan characterized herself as an "illiterate" woman who married at the age of 13 and worked tirelessly to ensure her children received a quality education and a better life:

> I didn't study in my country. They got me married when I was 13 years old. I don't know a school. Why do you think I made sure my kids have an education? Because I have been very upset with myself … and Hamdillah [thank God], I taught them, I got them married. … I arranged for their travel, Hamdillah.

In prewar Syria, her husband's salary from his job in the army could not sustain eight children. Jihan utilized her social entrepreneurship skills to provide for the family and proudly shared that people heard of her "by word of mouth and through God's will." Jihan's home in Aleppo was also the principal meeting place for her married daughters and their families to cook and spend time together.

In the early days of the Syrian civil war (2011–present), Jihan escaped to Turkey with her unmarried son and daughter, but her husband refused to leave with them. In Turkey, Jihan worked as a matchmaker and volunteered with organizations that helped fellow Syrian refugees. It was here that Jihan, her son, and two of her daughters applied for refugee status through the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). While her daughters' applications were processed quickly, Jihan's application was delayed several times before it was finally accepted; her son's application did not move forward at all. In 2016, her daughters landed in Toronto, and Jihan joined them that December, leaving behind her other children and her husband.[8]

Once in Toronto, Jihan moved in with her daughter Bassema and her family, totalling six people. Bassema's family was resettled through the BVOR program in a unique cost-splitting arrangement between private sponsors and the Canadian government. They initially lived in an apartment secured by Bassema's family's private sponsors; however, after three months in cramped quarters, they rented a larger house with the agreement that Jihan would live in their basement for a small rental fee, available to her through the one-year GAR allowance. But Jihan found the basement uncomfortable, describing it as a "grave," and refused to live there. After Jihan took over one of the

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[6] **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** present a family tree for each grandmother. The grandmothers, Jihan and Zeynab, are highlighted in black, and children and grandchildren resettled in Canada whose household the grandmothers joined are highlighted in grey. Due to space limitations, and for ease of understanding, the family trees are abbreviated and prioritize the matrilineal mother–child ties most germane to the data and analysis presented in the article.

[7] In the Arab world, matchmaking is traditionally practised by middle-aged women who seek single women and men in the community to find them partners. Matchmakers are usually armed with strong social skills and in-depth knowledge about single people and their families in their jurisdiction.

[8] In one interview, Jihan briefly mentioned that her husband remarried and is still living with his new wife in Aleppo.

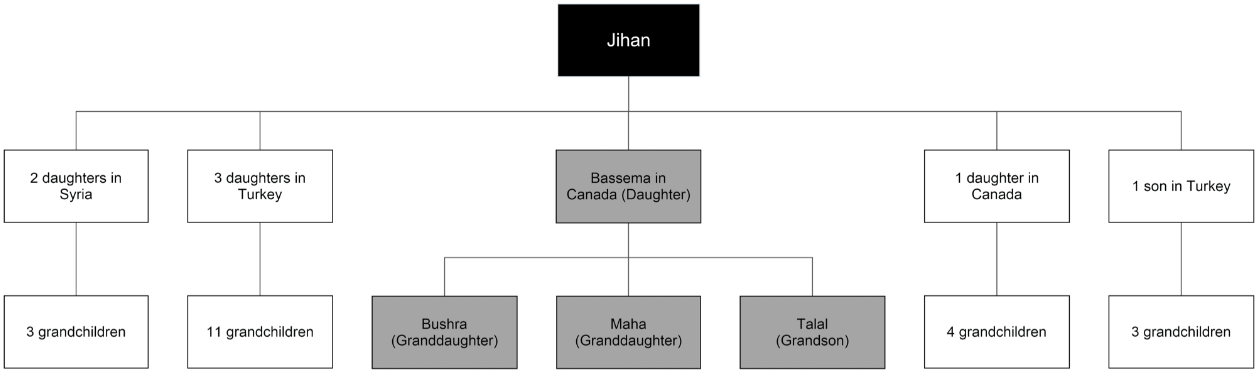

Figure 1
Jihan's Family Tree

upstairs bedrooms, her 11-year-old grandson moved into his parents' bedroom, which added to tension within the family. Though Jihan mentioned that she did most of the cooking for the household, Bassema offered a different story in subsequent interviews, stating that her mother never "lifted a needle" in her home but "has a lot of activity outside the house." Such activities, according to Bassema, were oriented towards the larger Arab Canadian community in Toronto. Indeed, we know from our interviews with Jihan that she created and participated in local lending circles, matchmaking services, and other forms of aid and advice. Jihan's activities within and orientation towards the larger Arab community increased the tension between her and Bassema.

Feeling like a burden to others, Jihan believed having her own home would grant her the power and honour she once had in Syria. Given her limited finances, Jihan applied for her own subsidized housing unit through the City of Toronto's centralized waiting list. However, she complained the process was slow and inconsiderate of older people and feared she would "end up on the streets." According to Jihan, her daughter's BVOR sponsor group had provided practical help and emotional care that Jihan, an elder, had not received as a GAR. For example, Bassema's BVOR sponsor group rented the family's first apartment prior to their arrival in Canada and offered Bassema a cooking job in one of the sponsor's restaurants. Bassema shared, however, that the most important help from the BVOR sponsors was their continuous emotional support. In Bassema's words, "one of them [the sponsors] was a better mother to me than my own."

When we revisited Jihan the following year, she was still searching for a home and felt the government had abdicated its responsibility to ensure her basic needs were met. She outlined health problems ranging from a hernia to diabetes and carpal tunnel syndrome, which made it difficult for her to work outside the home, as she explained to a social assistance employee:

> I went to the welfare [provincial social assistance agency] and told them it [the money] is not enough. They told me, "Go work." I told them, "I have hernia, rheumatism and my nerves." … This can't get straightened [points to one of her fingers]. At night, I get painkillers.

Eventually, Jihan found other ways to manoeuvre through the system. For example, though she did not find employment, she found a place to live through the new personal networks she established for herself in Toronto. Her journey to a new home began when she joined an English-language school in her neighbourhood. There, she befriended many of the young Arab Canadian women in her classes. According to Jihan, she became something of a maternal figure: women sought her advice on matters related to cooking, matchmaking, and money management. Jihan described their respect and affection for her, although this was a claim we could not verify: "They love me, really, they love me."

Her efforts to build networks outside her daughter Bassema's household paid off when conflicts between Bassema and Jihan escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite Bassema's health-related objections, Jihan continued to invite people outside their household inside the family home to socialize. Bassema described to us her concern that Jihan's socializing jeopardized everyone's safety, especially Bassema's husband, who suffered from long-term health issues. Several months into the pandemic, Jihan left her daughter's home to live with other Arab newcomer women from the network she built. Eventually, through her network's knowledge of the Canadian system, she was advised to move into an emergency shelter for the unhoused: a step that moved her up the social housing waitlist and eventually granted Jihan her own subsidized housing unit.

Zeynab's Story

Zeynab, a mother to 6 daughters and 2 sons and a grandmother to 40 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren, arrived in Toronto with her own mother, Rashida, in 2018. In Syria, Zeynab owned a grocery store and was the main provider for her eight children and sick husband, who passed away from cancer 11 years prior to her arrival in Toronto. Zeynab was proud that her shop was not only a hub for her local community but a significant landmark for anyone passing through her town. Her nickname in the neighbourhood was the "mayor," which, according to Zeynab, showed how much she was respected, trusted, and well-known in the community. In her private life, her home was where immediate and extended family congregated every Saturday for dinner and leisure.

During the Syrian civil war, Zeynab was forced to leave her home and business in Aleppo and cross over into Turkey, where she lived with one of her daughters and sustained herself by selling groceries and used clothing. After Zeynab's mother fell and broke her hip while she was back in Syria, Zeynab went to retrieve her for medical attention in Turkey. At the Syrian–Turkish border, Zeynab sat her mother in a cart attached to a rope and pulled her towards the border. The Turkish border soldiers denied them entrance multiple times, but ultimately, and as a condition to allow them into Turkey, the soldiers dared Zeynab to pull her mother's cart with her mouth, and without hesitation, she agreed. The soldiers tied Zeynab's hands back, stuffed the rope in her mouth, and watched her pull the cart towards the entrance. This resulted in her losing all her front teeth. A group of humanitarian aid workers witnessed the incident, scolded the soldiers, and helped Zeynab and her mother to a hospital. After two successful operations for her mother's broken hip and pelvis, Zeynab smuggled her out of the hospital and into Turkey. In Turkey, Zeynab often carried her ailing mother on her back and sold cardboard boxes and empty bottles on the streets to earn money. Zeynab was spotted by UNHCR personnel and offered refugee status and resettlement in Canada, where her

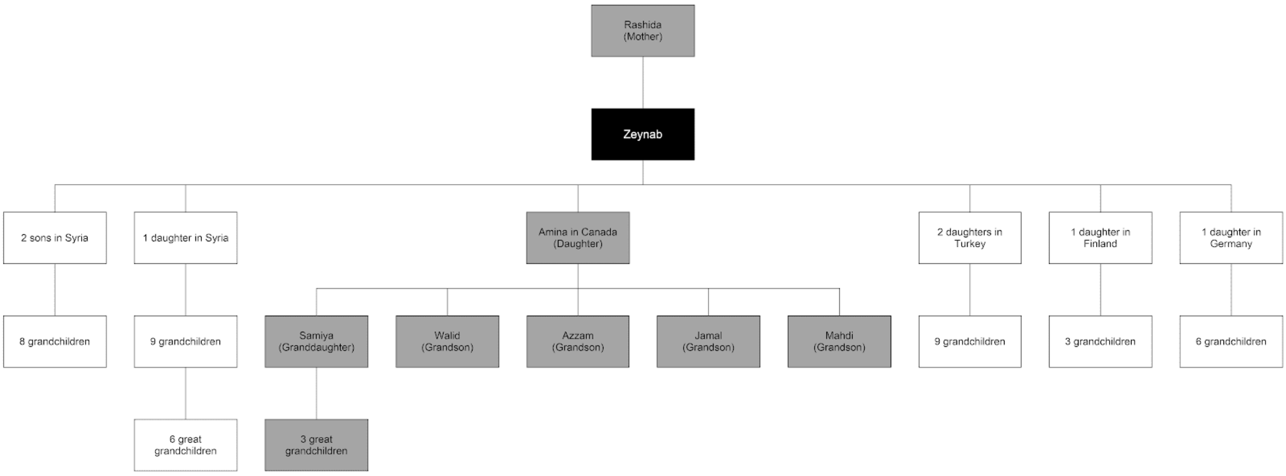
Rashida (Mother)
Zeynab
2 sons in Syria
1 daughter in Syria
Amina in Canada (Daughter)
2 daughters in Turkey
1 daughter in Finland
1 daughter in Germany
8 grandchildren
9 grandchildren
Samiya (Granddaughter)
Walid (Grandson)
Azzam (Grandson)
Jamal (Grandson)
Mahdi (Grandson)
9 grandchildren
3 grandchildren
6 grandchildren
6 great grandchildren
3 great grandchildren

Figure 2
Zeynab's Family Tree

daughter Amina had been recently resettled. Although Zeynab's mother was also offered resettlement, the remainder of her family was not.

Upon landing in Toronto as a GAR, Zeynab and her mother lived for a few months with Amina and her husband, who had recently welcomed their fifth child. Zeynab and her mother eventually moved into their own apartment in the same neighbourhood, where in addition to caring for her frail mother, Zeynab cared for her grandson, who moved in with them. Zeynab also consistently provided her daughter, Amina, with emotional support and encouragement, which we observed during our interviews:

> **Rula:** (Addressing Amina) To what degree do you feel that you are important in Canada in general or important to your own small community? Do you feel like you are worthy?
>
> **Amina:** (Shyly) Kind of, not really …
>
> **Rula:** Why?
>
> **Amina:** Because … a little, not much.
>
> **Zeynab:** Because she doesn't go out. If she does, she will become more confident about herself. If she meets more people, she will be fine. When she knows people and mingles more, then she will have more worth in the society.
>
> **Rula:** You are encouraging her.
>
> **Zeynab:** Yes, of course. But now she is home with the role of housewife and mother, but Inshallah [God willing], Inshallah I will help her blossom like a flower.

When Amina hesitated to answer our questions or had trouble finding the right words to express her feelings, Zeynab stepped in with strong and uplifting words. By caring for her grandson, Zeynab also allowed her daughter to address her own medical issues, which included "a virus in the blood and liver cirrhosis." However, Zeynab had her own serious medical problems as well. Other than the oral health conditions and back pain she lives with due to the ordeals she suffered at the Turkish border, Zeynab was diagnosed with breast cancer in Canada. The cancer forced Zeynab, her mother, and her grandson to leave their apartment and move into Amina's basement in a small bungalow in the outer suburbs of Toronto. For Zeynab, moving back in with Amina meant she could receive help from her daughter after her cancer operation and continue to provide her daughter with emotional support. But she disliked and distrusted her son-in-law, who controlled Amina and discouraged her from attending school or even leaving their home. He also overcharged Zeynab for the basement, requiring her to hand over most of her social assistance income.[9]

Despite these limitations, Zeynab remained proactive, positive, and resourceful in finding ways to improve her and her mother's living situation. For example, Zeynab located different service provider organizations (SPOs) that offered newcomers free food, clothing, and household items, as well as an SPO that helped them with translation services, completing medical forms, and obtaining furniture. After months of searching, Zeynab also procured an electric wheelchair for her mother from a RISE study research assistant. She continually expressed hope and enthusiasm to find work and become financially independent. However, due to her health conditions and caregiving responsibilities, she was unable able to join school or learn the language that could help her navigate the system more efficiently. Two years after landing in Canada, her frustration was evident:

> **Zeynab:** The welfare [social assistance employee] told me, "Why don't you work?" I told her, "I have cancer." She told me, "My dad is 85 years old and has blood cancer and he works." I told her, "Your dad … like, doesn't have house expenses … responsibility for the woman [her mother]."
>
> **Rula:** Of course.
>
> **Zeynab:** The man works. If I didn't have responsibilities, I would leave the house and go work. … Here, there isn't work you can do [without credentials]. In Turkey, you can work in anything.

Although Zeynab was offered monthly assistance from the provincial government, she said it was insufficient to survive and have a place of her own. In the future, she hopes to find employment opportunities: "I can work in anything. … I don't find work to be shameful. Work is important because the government's allowance is not enough." Recently, Zeynab's living situation changed once again after Amina separated from her husband with her mother's support. Thus, Zeynab, her mother, Amina, and her new son initially moved in with Amina's newly married adult daughter before finding their own place. Amina's four adult sons joined them, and they now total eight in a small apartment.

CLAIMS-MAKING, MATTERING, AND SUBORDINATE INTEGRATION

In this section, we bring together the cases of Jihan and Zeynab to understand three major patterns: how Arab migrant family dynamics around claims-making (Joseph, 2012) manifest in forced migration contexts; how grandmothers' pre-migration role identities, including their sense of mattering and control, are challenged by the conditions of their resettlement; and how they ultimately navigate a subordinate integration into Canadian society as elder refugee women.

We define **claims-making** as expectations, entitlements, and demands of others with no room for negotiation (consult Joseph, 2012). This is a characteristic of patriarchal kinship societies where "both women and men" are claimed by each other and "always" belong to someone (Joseph, 2012 p. 17; Kanaaneh, 1995, p. 132). We define **mattering** as the extent to which people believe they are important to others and perceive their role in the world around them to be significant (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 339; Rosenberg & McCollough, 1981). Claims-making and mattering have different connotations regarding the self; claims are imposed by an external kinship system, whereas mattering is an internal evaluation of oneself in relation to society. However, both concepts are highly associated or fused in a Syrian cultural context: to be claimed by others and to be able to claim others implies that one matters in their society.

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[9] Her son-in-law seized $1,100 CAD from Zeynab each month for the basement; the entire bungalow's monthly rent was $1,700.

In Syria, Jihan and Zeynab were matriarchs; they were well-known and sought out in their communities. As the main providers for their families, they were "claimed and claimable." They held a secure status and clear identity roles, owned their homes where family gathered, and were productive, significant members of their communities. All of this provided them reciprocity of claims from others and gave them a sense of mattering in both their homes and communities.

Jihan's and Zeynab's forced displacement and migration to Canada imposed roles that challenged their pre-migration claimability and sense of mattering (**Figure 3**).

To be sure, the grandmothers' identity roles and their sense of claimability and mattering were likely also challenged at the onset of displacement, including in-transit places and refugee camps (consult Rabiah-Mohammed et al., 2022). But because we do not have a full picture of the grandmothers' lives in Turkey, we focus here on their lives in Canada. In Jihan's case, her need for independence but also validation from a younger generation of Syrian women reflects the kinship claim-bearing rules she carries into the migrant home. From the onset of when our research team met Jihan in front of the wedding photo, she claimed her position as a powerful elder matriarch who was to be obeyed and who could claim authority over her kin through aggression or violence. But in a new Canadian context, where Bassema was now head of household, the imposition of Jihan's resettlement into her daughter's household in Toronto, and her ensuing struggles with her daughter and grandchildren, activated Jihan's sense of loss over not being claimed by them. Joseph asserts that in such "relational contexts to be unclaimed is to be outside of society" (2012, p. 19). Indeed, Jihan repeatedly described how she felt like an outsider in her daughter's household following her resettlement; her role identity and sense of mattering within her immediate family were upended. In an interview, she shared:

> We decided to live together, but it is very difficult, very difficult. I mean, I really need to live by myself. … My soul [alternate translation: psyche] is tired. I am alone. What do I want from my girls? This one's husband is sick; she is following him. The other is following her kids. … I go to my bed. I cry, cry, cry, cry, cry until I fall asleep.

Jihan's understanding of the evolving relationship dynamic with her daughter Bassema reflects an "unbalanced reciprocity," a term used by Nedelcu and Wyss to describe transnational parents' experience when their "children's recognition, gratitude and support are not reciprocated in equal measure to their own contribution to domestic work and childcare" (2020, p. 296). Jihan's belief that her pre-migration care and support of Bassema in Syria and Turkey were not reciprocated resulted in her perception that she did not matter. Indeed, the power dynamic between Jihan and Bassema being upended in Canada was perceived by Jihan as a lack of respect and appreciation. From Jihan's 10-year-old grandson's request not to interfere with him to Bassema's persistence on setting her own rules in her household, Jihan's sense

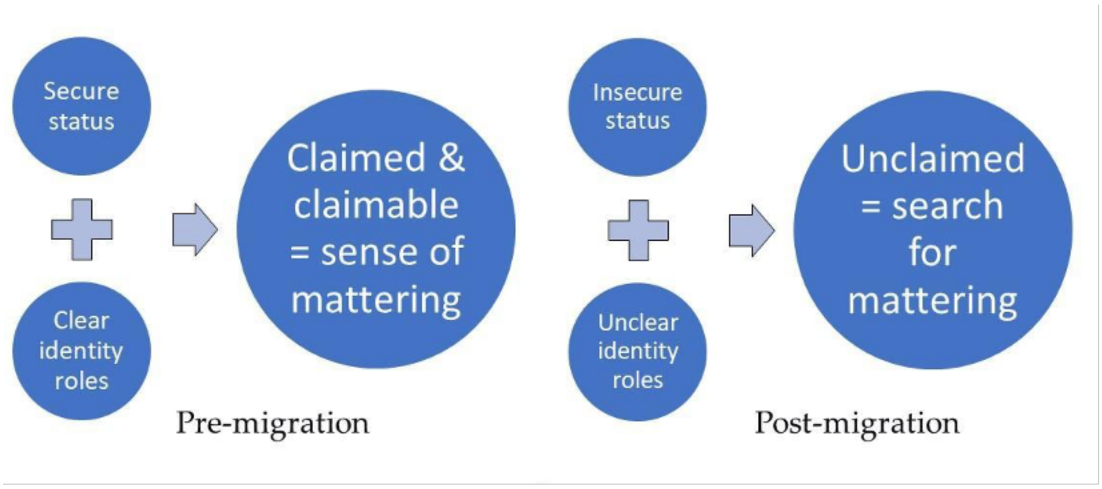

Figure 3
Claims-Making and Mattering: Pre-Migration and Post-Migration

of worth and mattering within her immediate family were challenged. This, in turn, exacerbated Jihan's need to move out of Bassema's home and rent her own apartment. Jihan shifted her orientation away from her daughter's family and towards her co-ethnic community, where she described feeling loved. Jihan's shift of her attention, care, and sense of mattering away from her immediate family, and towards the broader Syrian community in Toronto, helps illustrate some of the ways that forced migration can upend pre-existing family dynamics and individual identities.

While Jihan's sense of claimability and mattering shifted dramatically following resettlement, Zeynab's role and place within her family stayed relatively intact. For example, Zeynab's caregiving and connection to her family members extended into the new migrant home. Since arriving in Canada, she took over caring for her newborn grandson and her elderly sick mother and assisted her own daughter, Amina, in both material and emotional ways, such as encouraging her to keep up with her English classes and leave her husband. In this way, Zeynab was once again the matriarch claimed by her immediate family members in the migrant home. However, Zeynab's relational claimability, which secured her identity role in her home country, could not be the exact same in Canada. Given her difficult financial and health situations, which forced her and her mother to move in with Amina's family, and the relative power that Amina's husband had over the entire family's financial resources following resettlement, Zeynab was forced to navigate what Joseph refers to as a "situational shift of claim" (1996, p. 20). Due to her situation, Zeynab had to abide by and temporarily accept her son-in-law's rules and the subordination he imposed on them while they were in his household. Her sense of claimability shifted slightly and was incomplete.

Nonetheless, even with her own fragile health, Zeynab continued to care for others and advocate for her daughter's independence, which included learning English and leaving home. Zeynab's sense of reciprocity also diverged from Jihan's. After her cancer operation, she expressed gratitude for the care her daughter provided, reflecting balanced reciprocity. This balanced reciprocity was significant for the entire family, as Zeynab's advocacy for her daughter was a factor that empowered Amina to leave her husband and begin divorce proceedings.

Jihan and Zeynab's sense of claimability and mattering in Canada were mediated by what we term a **subordinate integration** into Canadian society. Although they were homeowners and working women in Syria, both grandmothers became unmoored from these roles and occupations following their displacement and, later, upon landing in Canada. Each grandmother was also forced to relocate multiple times across the city, in complicated arrangements that involved their daughters' households already resettled in Canada. Along with health issues that slowed their integration into Canadian society, both experienced feelings of social disposability following their prolonged unemployment after resettlement and negative interactions with social assistance workers. Their inability to earn income in Canada blocked both grandmothers from making independent financial decisions, and this, alongside the dispersion of their families across the globe, made them unable to reconstitute their former matriarchal homes in Syria. Thus, as the grandmothers' broader social status deteriorated after displacement, so did their claimability and sense of mattering.

This dynamic is especially pronounced in the case of Jihan, who was required to draw on her social networks to secure a shared apartment with newcomer women outside her family before finally getting a subsidized apartment of her own. During her first five years in Canada, Jihan relocated three times and, as a result, experienced three distinctive household living arrangements that fell outside the cultural norms and values that characterized her life before forced migration, when she was a homeowner. Jihan's unstable living situation was further compounded by her unemployment and the small government allowance she received. Although Jihan told us that she voiced her concerns to a worker at a social assistance agency, a claim we could not verify, she was nonetheless frustrated by what she perceived as a lack of government assistance or advice that she thought would help her improve her living conditions.

Like Jihan, Zeynab too was forced to relocate several times in Toronto. Zeynab's four different living arrangements were intimately tied up with Amina's difficult marriage and caregiving needs, as well as her own health complications and lack of formal support systems. Despite being a homeowner in Syria, Zeynab's housing in Canada was unstable and constricted by her unemployment and insufficient social assistance for rent. Like Jihan, Zeynab told us that she raised these concerns to a social assistance worker and was unsatisfied with the worker's suggestion to find a job despite Zeynab's health conditions and other limitations. In this way, both women found themselves slotted into subordinate roles in their new country's resettlement regime. At the intersection of multiple marginalized structural positions as undervalued elder women and newcomer refugees, Jihan and Zeynab experienced changes to their roles and identities in Canada that did not previously characterize their lives in Syria.

CONCLUSION

Both Jihan and Zeynab were able to reclaim some of their lost status by forming new social networks and reaching out for information and assistance beyond their immediate families, easing their integration in the process. Their experiences suggest how, despite having very little in the way of material resources, both grandmothers contributed essential forms of caregiving that may have improved others' lives and wellbeing. In caring for her infant grandson and offering her adult daughter the emotional support needed to finally separate from her controlling husband, Zeynab created space for her kin to grow and adapt to a new society following resettlement. Jihan's care work differed: although her mutual aid, matchmaking, and other social activities were not oriented towards her immediate family, they may have strengthened the social networks and supportive ties between others in her co-ethnic community. Nonetheless, Jihan's story also reveals a more complicated and difficult story about how grandmothers' power and authority may be enacted in familial relationships. Recalling the vignette at the start of this article involving a wedding photograph from Syria, coercion and force were additional factors that contributed to Jihan's authority and matriarchal status in the household, especially regarding her daughter Bassema. In this way, although migration disrupted the matriarchal status both grandmothers held in Syria, others in the family found increased independence or status in Canada. With the help of her sponsors, Jihan's daughter Bassema, who was forced by Jihan to marry her husband, was able to secure a living space and set different boundaries between her and her mother. She even described finding a new maternal figure in one of her BVOR sponsors. Although small in scale and inductive in approach, our case study lends some additional evidence to migration scholarship that describes and theorizes reversals of power within migrant families, especially those related to gender and age.

The experiences of elder refugee women like Jihan and Zeynab therefore offer a window into how migration status, gender, age, and other axes of difference can shift or upend the sense of mattering, authority, and status that newcomers bring with them to new contexts of resettlement. We suspect that the minimal incorporation of elders in Canadian refugee and migration policy and overall defunding of social welfare supports only hastens such reconfigurations of newcomers' multigenerational family structures. Again, we cannot make representative claims about the overall state of Syrian newcomers or forced migrant elders in Canada from our observations and interview excerpts. Because we prioritize grandmothers' own narratives in this article, future work could more thoroughly integrate the narratives of other family members to shed additional light on intergenerational care dynamics. We also do not query social assistance employees, private sponsors, or other resettlement-related service providers in the grandmothers' worlds. Future research integrating perspectives from newcomer elders with resettlement and social service providers may strengthen academic and policy understandings of the dynamics suggested in this article. Finally, future studies could document, differentiate, and theorize different forms of subordinate integration, such as those originating from newcomers' initial displacement versus those that originate from resettlement in Canada or other receiving contexts specifically.

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