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Families with Refugee Backgrounds Rebuilding New Lives: A Saskatchewan Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores factors contributing to refugees' resilience in Regina, Saskatchewan. It aims to add to the emerging body of Canadian literature on refugees' strengths and experiences as they navigate resettlement in smaller urban centres. Data were collected from three focus groups that explored the experiences of 15 people from seven countries who had settled in Saskatchewan. Findings show common patterns that contributed to resilience for refugees, including pursuits of Canadian education, employment, social networks, and personal qualities. Conclusions indicate that protective factors (i.e., personal characteristics, social supports and networks, starting over in education and employment) that facilitated resilience for participants interacted and worked together to help them overcome adversity during settlement.

KEYWORDS

resilience; refugees; starting over; new life; adversities; employment

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative explore les facteurs contribuant à la résilience des réfugiés à Regina, en Saskatchewan. Elle vise à contribuer à la littérature canadienne émergente sur les forces et les expériences des réfugiés dans le cadre de leur réinstallation dans de petits centres urbains. Les données ont été recueillies lors de trois groupes de discussion qui ont exploré les expériences de 15 personnes originaires de sept pays qui se sont installées en Saskatchewan. Les résultats révèlent des facteurs communs ayant contribué à la résilience des réfugiés, notamment la poursuite d'études au Canada, l'emploi, les réseaux sociaux et les qualités personnelles. Les conclusions indiquent que les facteurs de protection (c'est-à-dire les caractéristiques personnelles, le soutien et les réseaux sociaux, la reprise des études et de l'emploi) qui ont facilité la résilience des participants ont interagi et se sont combinés pour les aider à surmonter l'adversité au cours de l'établissement.

INTRODUCTION

Canada has been described by the United Nations refugee agency as one of the leading countries for the settlement of refugees (UNHCR, 2022). Through its Blended Visa Officer-Referred, privately sponsored, and government-assisted refugee programs, Canada has responded to various refugee crises, including supporting those who arrived from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Molloy & Simeon, 2016); those airlifted as they fled from the Kosovo conflict (UNHCR, 2000); those rescued from the brutal regime of Idi Amin in Uganda (Muhammedi, 2022); and Syrian refugees (Garcea & Kikulwe, 2019). While these are a few examples of past responses to refugee crises, they are reminiscent of Canada's leadership in the resettlement of individuals faced with adversity. Statistics Canada's 2021 census showed that

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218,430 refugees were admitted as permanent residents from 2016 to 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022b).

Despite refugees' "exposure to violent and traumatic experiences," many have rebuilt their lives and are on par with Canadian-born residents (Donato & Ferris, 2020, p. 12). While many refugees have "worse physical and mental health concerns than other immigrants" (p. 12), they demonstrate resilience by upgrading their educational credentials, gaining meaningful employment, acquiring citizenship, buying houses, and contributing to the development of their communities, just as other immigrants and Canadian-born citizens do (UNHCR, 2022).

The aim of this study was to understand what helped refugee families in Regina, Saskatchewan, to be resilient, as well as to determine what they perceived it meant to be resilient. This study is important because it adds to the emerging body of research on resettlement and adaptation processes for refugees in Canada's smaller urban centres that are non-traditional newcomer-receiving communities (Bonifacio & Drolet, 2017; Haugen, 2019). Saskatchewan is a largely rural province; it has the fastest growing population in Canada, and immigration plays a significant role in its economic growth by increasing the pool of workers in the province and enriching the ethnocultural mosaic of its communities (Government of Saskatchewan Ministry of the Economy, 2012, 2014).

Regina, the capital city of Saskatchewan, is the second largest city in the province, with a population of 226,404 (City of Regina, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2023). Saskatoon is the province's largest city, with a population of 347,536 (Statistics Canada, 2023). Regina is a diverse city with a population growth of 1.51% to 4.48% over the past 11 years (Statistics Canada, 2023). The predominant language spoken is English (98.1%); 12.3%

of the population's mother tongue was neither French nor English (Statistics Canada, 2023). Between 2016 and 2021, Regina had nearly 1,405 refugees, with the majority coming from Asia and the Middle East (765), followed by Africa (635) (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Lam (2019) noted that more newcomers are now preferring to settle in smaller rural centres because of the lower costs of living, more job opportunities, and better quality of life in comparison with urban centres. What makes this study unique is that it contextualizes the experiences of refugees in Regina, using the concept of resilience as a framework to understand their varied strengths, assets, and resources that helped them overcome different adversities post-migration.

BACKGROUND ON RESILIENCE

In recent years, the concepts of resilience and family strengths have become more evident in social work literature as social workers have sought to identify what works for families and individuals faced with adversities (Matheson et al., 2020). Research on resilience originated from studies on child development and family stress with a focus on child adaptation, protective factors, processes, or coping mechanisms that helped children to overcome harmful experiences (Masten & Curtis, 2000; Matheson et al., 2020). Resilience as a concept describes the adaptation process to severe and cumulative stressors that are both normative, to be expected over the life course, and non-normative, which are unexpected turns of events that create permanent changes in families (Svetina, 2014).

In this study, we adopted Cardoso and Thompson's (2010) conceptualization of resilience as two-tiered. First, it is the process of how individuals overcome adversity. Resilience is often discussed in terms of risk

and protective factors in the immediate environment. Risk and protective factors are not static; they are ever changing. As such, it has been demonstrated that resilience is not a steady state but fluctuates with risk and protective factors operating at any given time (Rutter, 2013). Individual experiences of adversity vary, and therefore, there are various pathways to resilience. The processes that influence adaptation to hardships are unique to each individual and are influenced by one's interactions within the social environment. However, temperament, good coping skills, and a belief in a higher power or religiosity, as well as community protective factors such as school, church, or community groups have been described by Carlson et al. (2012) and Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw (2008) as protective factors that enable individuals to be resilient.

Second, Cardoso and Thompson (2010) described resilience as involving cultural and societal expectations of what is regarded as success. Ungar's study (2013) focused on resilience across cultures and contexts, which also helped to deepen an understanding of the fundamental importance of culture and family in the definition and acquisition of resilience. Maintaining family rituals and customs is linked to stronger family unity, and support from the extended family has been shown to be a strong protective factor, which indicates that resilience involves a range of processes and mechanisms that occur before, during, and after adversity (Rutter, 2013). In some cultures, family and individual resilience is centred around the family unit and the ability to flourish despite adverse circumstances (Bhana & Bachoo, 2011; Martin et al., 2015). Resilience leads to a chain of events that allows individuals to regain and follow a positive trajectory despite adversity (Rutter, 2013)—for example, completing their education or gaining employment or a promotion.

Resilience scholars have found that the presence of protective factors facilitates an individual's ability and capacity to overcome adversity (Masten & Curtis, 2000). However, questions remain regarding how protective factors work together or singularly to help individuals and families overcome adversity (Babatunde-Sowole et al., 2016; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). Resilience as a concept also has been criticized for emphasizing individual's abilities and giving less attention to structural barriers that cause marginalization for vulnerable persons (Gray, 2011). Understanding resilience as simply the ability to cope with ordinary challenges limits opportunities to view resilience as a unique process, different from normative adaptation (Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006). Using the term **resilience** in such a casual way is a slippery slope to societal perceptions that some individuals simply do not have what it takes to overcome adversity, which undermines understanding the complex process underlying resilience and the provision of appropriate interventions to individuals facing adversity (Sleijpen et al., 2013; Wylie et al., 2020).

It has been concluded that resilience is a complex adaptation in the context of adversity (Layne et al., 2007; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008). This conclusion is of paramount importance to our study, which focused on the personal, familial, and socio-economic environmental factors that contributed to family resilience in refugee families who faced and overcame adversity during pre-migration, transition, and post-migration journeys. A similar research path was taken by Schweitzer et al. (2007) in their Australian study of coping and resilience among Sudanese refugees in the three periods of their migration, namely, pre-migration from

Sudan, transit, and post-migration in their host country. In this study, we focused on the post-migration period, with particular attention paid to **resilience**, which we defined as complex processes that required multiple adaptations by the participants in this study as part of their settlement in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach was undertaken to conduct three focus groups consisting of 15 participants total (4 men and 11 women) who came to Canada as refugees and were living in Regina, Saskatchewan. Sample sizes as small as 10–16 participants involving comprehensive and in-depth interviews have been considered acceptable in qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2006; Weller et al., 2018). We employed purposive sampling (Palys, 2008) to select participants based on the following criteria: They were individuals (a) aged 18 years or older, (b) with a refugee background or status, (c) born outside of Canada, (d) with sufficient English-language skills to participate in the study (level 4 and up based on the Canadian Language Benchmarks; Newbold et al., 2013; Sossou et al., 2008), (e) living in Regina for at least five years, and (f) who were in or had a partner in the labour market or post-secondary education (i.e., actively connected in the community). We excluded individuals who were still seeking employment or not attending post-secondary education because literature indicates that low educational attainment for refugees decreases employability and self-sufficiency, as well as the ability to rebuild their lives (Chen & Hulsbrink, 2019).

Data Gathering

We obtained ethics approval (ethics reference #2016-040) from the University of Regina Research Ethics Board prior to recruiting participants. In 2016 and 2017, the Regina Open Door Society (RODS), a federal government refugee-serving agency, agreed to circulate information about this study in all their programs and to contact former families and individuals they felt qualified for this study. To widen recruitment, we also used the snowball technique by contacting individuals in the community who knew of potential participants who met the study criteria. We recruited eight participants through the snowballing process, and seven others were referred to us by the immigrant-serving agency. The demographic profiles of the 15 participants are summarized in Table 1.

To ensure rigour, the researchers constantly probed participants for additional information during the focus groups by asking further questions to provide more details. We gathered rich data and reached saturation in our analysis; thus, we were able to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' conceptualizations of resilience based on their experiences. It should be noted that the first author of the research team has maintained his involvement with some of the participants for other studies and followed their experiences into the COVID-19 pandemic.

The three focus groups were conducted based on participants' availability and convenience. The first focus group met at the settlement agency and consisted of two men and two women. The second focus group was held at the University of Regina and consisted of mixed genders (two men and two women). The last focus group was held at a seniors' home and included seven women. Each focus group took one to two hours. The first was the only focus group where interpretation was needed, and the research assistant provided Arabic interpretation. All participants received a $25 gift certificate in recognition of their participation and contribution to

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants (n = 15)

General characteristics		n (%)
Gender	Man	4 (27)
	Woman	11 (73)
Age (years)	20–39	8 (53)
	40–49	3 (20)
	50–59	3 (20)
	60+	1 (7)
Home country	Nigeria	1 (7)
	India	1 (7)
	Democratic Republic of Congo	2 (13)
	Burundi	1 (7)
	Syria	5 (33)
	Sudan	1 (7)
	Zimbabwe	4 (26)

the study. We recruited participants with different family statuses, educational backgrounds, religions, languages, age levels, and genders to reflect the heterogeneity of refugees. We chose a diverse sample because we wanted to understand how the concept of resilience varied across refugees with different backgrounds, experiences, and histories. Research by Cardoso and Thompson (2010) indicated that there are multiple pathways to resilience, which must be contextualized based on race, ethnicity, and culture.

Data Analysis

The data collection process included six phases, adopted from Clarke and Braun (2017). Initially, the data from the three focus groups were transcribed verbatim and organized to allow the research team to familiarize themselves with the data. The second phase involved a review of the transcripts independently by the research team members and drawing emergent codes. The third phase consisted of the joint review of the data to develop a coding framework to identify agreed-upon codes and categories.

The fourth step was an ongoing examination and reorganizing of the codes, which also involved use of NVivo software to make advanced queries to identify the relationship between the key ideas gathered from the study, leading us to develop themes. As noted by Creswell (2007), analytic computer tools can help researchers to carry out rigorous data analysis, a method the research team used to finalize the coding process by engaging in collaborative deliberations and meaning-making processes. As a fifth step, we selected appropriate quotes for each of the identified themes. Data analysis was guided by the research question—What factors contribute to resilience for refugees in Saskatchewan?—and literature on the core ideas of resilience among refugee populations.

The three authors have immigrant-backgrounds from Uganda, Ukraine, and Jamaica. As authors and researchers, we were aware of our own biases and assumptions (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) based on lived experiences, professional work, and scholarship and how these beliefs could influence our interpreta-

tions of the data. To address the possibility of misinterpretation of the study results, the research team completed multiple readings of the transcripts and the themes to confirm that the participants' stories were captured in the data. Exact quotations have been included in to reflect the participants' stories. None of the participants opted to provide a pseudonym. For confidentiality, we referred to participants not by name but instead by identifying the focus group that they participated in. The sixth and final step in the process resulted in the writing of this article.

FINDINGS

Cardoso and Thompson (2010) conceptualized resilience as two-tiered. The first tier is the process of how individuals overcome adversity, and it is demonstrated by the themes of (a) personal qualities: here we paid particular interest to the characteristics/traits that helped participants become resilient; (b) external resources and supports, which illustrated how educational and faith-based institutions aided participants in achieving resilience; and (c) social networks, referred to as the building of new relationships, which was also important to the study participants in terms of overcoming settlement barriers.

The second tier according to Cardoso and Thompson (2010) includes cultural and societal expectations of success, which was demonstrated in this research by the fourth and final theme of navigating the challenges of starting over in education and employment to support oneself and one's families. Each of these themes is discussed in detail below.

Personal Qualities

Along with the available formal services, the personal qualities of participants—including determination, perseverance, and courage—contributed to their resilience. For example,

one participant said, "When you come, just don't sleep and be lazy" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). The following quote also demonstrates an example of perseverance:

> There is nothing impossible … but here in Canada, you know, hard work to survive. … I remember when I came in and I applied for the course, I was like "Oh, I have a degree back home." Once I applied, they told me, what we need is 95%, which I completed [in the] fifth attempt. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3)

The participants in this study highlighted various personal qualities needed to be resilient in adapting to another country such as patience, as noted by a participant coming from a war-torn country: "Be patient when you come here and not fight with other people … here you need to fight with your brain" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1).

Others also continued to speak about loss and the importance of perseverance in overcoming this adversity: "When you lose something that gives you more power to survive, they [you have] lost a lot which [in terms of what] has helped them [you] stand up again" (Participant from Sudan—Focus Group 3). By overcoming difficulties in refugee camps and building confidence when they were adjusting to Canada, some stated: "I learned how to overcome different obstacles or difficulties. Every kind of difficulty that we had to face, me with my husband, we were able to overcome it" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Others spoke of their unfulfilled aspirations: "[Initially] I didn't achieve my dreams, but now I dream of finishing my education, finding a good job, help[ing] my family and help[ing] other newcomers" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Others spoke of the need to work in cooperation with their spouses and others when faced with challenges. For example, a participant from Syria spoke of developing relationships with the people who assisted them:

I have made a lot of friends and those friends helped me become the person I am now. Of course, my husband is considered to be one of those close friends, we get along very well … especially with my [business] project which will hopefully get off the ground … it gave me a boost in terms of my personality. … I didn't think I had much confidence, but today I have plenty. (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1)

Other participants also reflected a similar sentiment, that by overcoming obstacles they became more confident: "I feel equal to others. Even if they call me a refugee, but when I came to the airport, I have all Canadian rights" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1).

Personal traits of determination, perseverance, and courage were evident in the participants' stories of how they overcame adversities. These personal aptitudes and adaptive behaviours were not only shaped and influenced by complex and multi-layered life experiences (e.g., war, living in camp conditions, multiple losses) but were also nurtured and fostered by relationships with others.

External Resources and Supports

Not surprising, the first source of support for many participants was help from settlement agencies to assist with obtaining basic needs in the beginning and utilizing settlement agency services to find employment. One Syrian participant said:

People are helpful … if you are a newcomer, you have a language barrier there is people to help you out … and you don't know how to make your résumé, they will help you make your résumé … they will go with you… when you have an interview. … [They will share information on] … workshops … all of this from RODS employment department. … They will help you prepare for your interview. (Focus Group 1)

Other external resources were educational institutions and government programs, which helped refugees to get into school so that they could become independent:

I'm still getting help from school. They have provincial training allowances and to continue your school and finish whatever courses … so that you can become something … to be depend[ent] on yourself. … I found out maybe if we are qualified … you can run your own business. (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1)

Settlement agencies offered information sessions on how to access banks and open bank accounts, read bus schedules, use interpretation services, access medical services, and learn how institutions work in Canada: "RODS taught us about life in Canada, how to shop, to use the buses" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Another participant said, "She [settlement worker, helped us find a] doctor, during the New Year. … They would give us stuff that was in very good condition. … People are help[ful]. When you come, you are not alone" (Focus Group 1).

When this family arrived, it was winter, and the participant said,

It's too cold … but when we came to a reception house … we get help from case worker[s]. … They helped us a lot, tell us where to take the bus, where we open our account for banking … and we moved to our apartment and we are living normal. … [They told us about how] to apply for [a driver's] licence. (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1)

Another noted, "The most important thing I learned is, Canada is a system. If you live in a system, there is a lot of advantages and benefits that can … help you achieve your dreams" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1).

However, some participants also spoke about not knowing what services existed and found it more difficult to understand how institutions worked and, subsequently, to adjust. Participants spoke about the need to reach out and educate themselves:

Not knowing where to find help or how, what social programs or how government services work or what programs are available to you, how to access them, the tax system. … Try not to be afraid to ask for help, to ask questions … should not be afraid to

… approach law enforcement for help … and that you have a voice … be involved in the school system, understand how it works, so that you are better able to help your children, ask questions at the bank … know what the fees are that you are paying. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

Churches and religious institutions were also identified as sources of support for newcomers in adjusting to Canada: "A lot of charity places like churches also helped us and a lot of Canadian families actually also gave us a hand" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Other participants spoke of religious leaders who helped: "There's one pastor from [country unnamed for confidentiality] who was coming to see me and other people. … When my daughter fell sick, he help[ed] us to [take her to] medical clinic" (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3). Participants spoke of how their affiliation with religious institutions and other agencies was helpful:

> So, the Muslim community was like [a] big helpful centre … because then you have people who have been here for years and they can help you go through it. The food bank was one of the great place[s] … also the library. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

Some participants identified the public library as an aid in their adjustment to the host country because they could use computer services for schoolwork and to obtain information about services:

> The library helped … because the only access you'd have to a computer was at school. … After school most of [us] never had a computer at home. … Most kids get [go to the library] to [access] that computer literacy. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

In their stories regarding resources, participants portrayed how they used and responded to the available supports. Through participants' stories, they demonstrated, on the one hand, that the institutional and religious resources helped to address their needs in adapting to new life situations, overcoming challenges, and developing resiliency. On the other hand, lack of knowledge about available resources limited their abilities to rebuild new lives, which also could lead to stigmatization and falsify societal views of their individual failings to adapt to the host environments.

Social Networks

Our findings also highlighted participants' need to have relationships with Canadians or those outside their cultural backgrounds. One participant with a Syrian background stated,

> I think you need to work more with the community, especially other people in need. … There are people who are in more need than refugees. We get assistance from the government while others don't get anything. … We need to work more with other community members. (Focus Group 1)

Being in a smaller city (i.e., Regina) also seemed to promote relationship building with others. As noted by one participant, "The people seem friendly though, because it is a small city. Everybody kind of knows everybody" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Other participants identified barriers in developing relationships with Canadians. In particular, one participant from Zimbabwe reported, "Some of the barriers were … in terms of your accent, trying to communicate. … People were at least kind and patient … [as well as] understanding" (Focus Group 2). In discussions about social relationships with people outside of family, some participants identified loneliness when striving to meet people from their home country. One Zimbabwean participant stated,

> Here in Canada, if you are going to your home, no one is going to disturb you. No one is going to come there to knock on your door. So, there is

loneliness. We were very happy on the day that we met our fellow Zimbabweans. We had been lonely, alone for two years. … When we first came, we wanted to socialize. … We were in our late thirties, and we felt lonely. … We had to drive [five hours] to find someone to talk to. … I think that's true for most immigrants, to find people from your own community. (Focus Group 2)

Another participant who was younger spoke about finding new avenues for developing social relationships. This person said, "I was involved in sports ever since we came here, but it gave us the opportunity to grow a community. … And it expanded our community besides just the people, immigrants we know" (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2).

Other participants believed they had to make a genuine effort to engage with people to develop social relationships:

For me, it was my personality, my character, … hardworking attitude and then just got me to where I am right now, and being able to communicate and network with the right people and staying positive has helped me to get to where I'm now, where I'm good friends with cohorts at the university. … I was able to network with some people at work that opened up many more doors that most people were unable to get on. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

Once again, religious groups played an important role, helping newcomers develop social relationships. Many participants indicated that "church groups were some of the big things that integrated … most immigrants [into the community]. … Some of my other friends … were Muslim, so the Muslim community was like big helpful centre for them" (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2). The importance of social networks in the resettlement context was demonstrated by the participants' relationship building, which is critical to gaining a sense of belonging in their efforts to build new lives.

The Challenge of "Starting Over" in Education and Employment

Understanding how participants navigated earning Canadian credentials led to gaining insights into how they overcame challenges related to education and employment, which are integral to achieving social and economic integration in host countries. The lack of a Canadian education was cited as a major barrier to finding employment and was evident in various disciplines and areas of work. Regardless of the level of education received in their home countries, many participants identified that foreign qualifications were not recognized in Canada; therefore, refugees needed to acquire a Canadian education.

One participant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo stated,

I did almost six years [of post-secondary education and] was being asked to start all over again. … They ask you to just start all over again, what you paid for was gone. If I had known, I would have come to Canada and do high school and do my other degree here. (Focus Group 3)

In the words of a participant from Syria, "Success [in Canada] is studying harder and working harder" (Focus Group 1). Educational pursuits required, once again, the personal qualities of determination and perseverance. The traits of willingness to study hard, determination, and perseverance were needed not only to start over with their educational pursuits but to overcome discrimination and a lack of inclusion.

Several participants experienced discrimination and exclusion when they returned to school. One participant from the Democratic Republic of the Congo described the discrimination as follows: "You want to sit close to somebody that is the same skin colour. … When we talk to people in class, they just keep quiet and don't want to answer you" (Focus Group 3). Another participant from Nigeria noted, "I can make sure everything

goes smoothly … [but] there is racism in school. … I try as much as I can to study really hard [to change others' perspectives]" (Focus Group 3).

Similarly, in discussions around employment opportunities, the recurring theme of non-acceptance of educational credentials from other countries came up:

> I am a pharmacist … and worked in [country] as a pharmacist for about 12 years. When I came here, I obviously expected to carry on with the pharmacy profession but then I came across an insurmountable barrier. … They automatically disqualified me. When I contacted the National Pharmacy Board in Toronto, they … sent me lists of books … and the syllabus, it was like 200 pages long. … I was basically on my own. … Basically, what I would have to do is start from scratch. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

Another major barrier to employment was a lack of English-language skills. A participant expressed,

> It's because of the language … that is causing another problem. My husband is really tired of this, he is not used to not working, he is not used to people giving him money or charity. … He desperately needs a job, because it is starting to affect relationships at home. (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1)

Another participant noted that "first you need the language, because if you don't know the language, how can you work?" (Participant from Burundi—Focus Group 3). A second participant from Nigeria stated, "For me, it's still hard because I don't know the language. … I study English. … It's still very hard for me even for finding a job" (Focus Group 3).

Other participants also spoke of the paradox whereby refugees need to have Canadian working experience in addition to Canadian education, but they are refused opportunities necessary to obtain Canadian employment experience:

> Somebody [that I know] has a master's degree here in multidisciplinary leadership in education and he [is] still sitting at home, looking for a job. When he applied, they will say they are looking for somebody with Canadian experience. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3)

Participants were frustrated by the need to have Canadian experience before applying for employment: "If you are not given the job, how will you get the experience?" (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3). Despite advanced planning, the need for Canadian experience before employment was evident. One participant stated,

> I tried to study the [labour] markets back home and I noticed how difficult it was for me to get a job. Coming here to Canada, I was being careful. I don't want to fall victim of that, studying a new course for four to five years, get a new job. … It is much easier to just go for eight-month course or two-year course and get a job. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3)

The belief that hard work would lead to success was evident for most participants. This was especially demonstrated when discussing themes of obtaining an education while working. One participant stated: "You have to work harder and study harder. … You balance them, you will be successful" (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1). Other participants spoke about volunteering and getting involved in the community as a pathway to learning English and to gaining employment:

> I love volunteering and now I help newcomer families to get their needs, and I am currently a volunteer for Saturday school. … I started a project. … I gathered some men and women who like to cook and taught them how to make some of our traditional food and how to sell to them to the community … hopefully one day I'll be able to open my own restaurant. (Participant from Syria—Focus Group 1)

Another participant believed it was important to have realistic expectations:

When you get to Canada, you have to calm down. Don't expect to be on the executive office [like you were] back in your country. … You have to start from zero somewhere. … No, you have to start from scratch and gradually, with determination, definitely you are going to get there. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3)

Finding immediate work required newcomers to take jobs outside of their areas of education, and this impacted their self-esteem as it reinforced their image as foreigners and resulted in isolation. It also is an expression of racism. A participant expressed,

I think there is a tendency for immigrants to take jobs, like cleaning jobs, that way you avoid people … that way you avoid people telling you that you have an accent. … [I] just thought nobody would hire me. (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 2)

One participant spoke about the need to work in lower-status jobs than what they had in their country of origin in order to find work in Canada: "The whole job thing isn't really as easy as they think. … Even when you are looking for a [job as a] dishwasher, it's hard. … I have to come down [in expectations and experience] so low" (Participant from Zimbabwe—Focus Group 3).

In discussions of self-esteem, others spoke of resilience in terms of finding work and adjusting to their new environments as major contributors to building their confidence: "For me, I have good communication. I have willpower. I do it myself. In starting [work], I'm really scared, [but] I never talk about it" (Participant from India—Focus Group 3).

Many participants needed to find work immediately so they could sponsor family members to come to Canada. For example, a participant from Zimbabwe stated:

I just wanted a job. … I just needed money to be able to look after myself and … to send back home for my kids. … That was all I was thinking about … saving money to bring them here. (Focus Group 2)

Sponsorship of family members was noted as particularly important by the participants because of the lack of affordable childcare, which is a barrier to employment and attending school. One participant from India stated,

The issue of childcare is a big challenge. My father-in-law [will] take my daughter [when] I'm working. … Then my mother-in-law [comes for] six months a year, and then my father-in-law [for] six months a year. … I have to spend lots of money for the [airline] tickets … because they only have visitor's visa. (Focus Group 3)

The reliance on family members from overseas to assist with childcare resulted in financial strains because families needed to pay for their travel. Participants also spoke about using family members to overcome the need to have Canadian references for employment: "I'm looking everywhere [for a] job. … Here I have a strong reference [from] my sister-in-law, she is the second-floor nurse" (Participant from India—Focus Group 3). Overall, having family members already in Canada served several purposes for the study participants, since family members provided childcare as well as employment references, which are key supports needed to enter the labour market and to attend school.

In summary, as demonstrated in the four study themes, many participants in our study faced structural barriers, which caused them to experience marginalization and vulnerabilities. The participants relied on personal qualities such as openness, perseverance in pursuing their goals, determination in succeeding, and courage to cope with discrimination and racism. These same personal traits helped them learn English, gain educational opportunities, and participate in the labour market to support themselves, their children, and their families. To minimize exposure to racism and discrimination, many participants initially chose jobs that required minimal interaction with people. Working in menial jobs required grave courage to

keep trying to achieve their goals and have a fulfilling life in Canada. However, being resilient and coping with systemic marginalization also serves to maintain the status quo and the root causes of marginalization because unsuccessful entry into the labour market becomes individualized rather than perceived as structural barriers and existing inequalities.

DISCUSSION

Similar to a previous Canadian study by Magro and Ghorayshi (2010), as well as American research by Lee et al. (2008), the findings of this study demonstrate perseverance, courage, optimism, patience, openness, and determination as key personal qualities that contribute to resilience when overcoming some of the barriers to refugee settlement. Along with these personal attributes, Kirmayer (2013) also identified that social supports, government programs, and institutions within people's (refugees') neighbourhoods and communities helped them to bounce back from histories of adversity. As such, resilience is the outcome of individual psychological processes and traits in interaction with available social supports and government and community programs that enable settlement. These internal (i.e., personal characteristics) and external factors (e.g., resources, supports, and informal social networks) facilitate what Cardoso and Thompson (2010) perceived as the first tier of resiliency. The second tier involved what is understood as success in the wider society (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). In this study, gaining success was perceived by participants as overcoming barriers to achieving Canadian education and entry into the labour market. Many participants spoke about their personal traits and social factors that facilitated resilience.

Although there is no consensus as to what successful settlement includes, government policy and federal and provincial programs are clearly integral to newcomers' successful integration in Canada (Haugen et al., 2023; Tolley & Young, 2011). Walton-Roberts et al. (2020) argued that there are key lessons learned from the Syrian refugee resettlement initiatives in Canada from 2015 to 2016, including the significance of Local Immigration Partnerships, first formed in 2008 and funded by the federal government to assist with the mobilization and coordination of key stakeholders to facilitate resettlement of newcomers. The Syrian refugee resettlement initiative was a clear demonstration of the federal and provincial governments playing key roles in preparing local communities to welcome refugees. In this study, for some participants, the ability to access Canadian education and the labour market was often dependent upon their ability to sponsor and reunite with their families to receive assistance with childcare. Simich et al. (2011) described maintaining cultural identity and the family unit as a strategy used by newcomers to foster settlement and resilience. Haugen et al. (2023) suggested that the federal government and Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada implement and expand policies that will support the reunification of families "in rural areas with limited services" as this "may support the long-term settlement of newcomers in rural places" (p. 112).

The fundamental finding was that all the study participants longed for a **new life** for themselves and their families. At the core of this new life was the pursuit of **finding and securing employment**, which Baran et al. (2018) described as the cornerstone of the refugee resettlement process because of its centrality in providing self-sufficiency (p. 102). In the participants'

view, being resilient was perceived as holding a job and participating in a new life in Canada. While obtaining Canadian education did not guarantee labour market entry, many participants perceived it as a necessary avenue to potential employment. Educational institutions and public libraries were important spaces for refugees to pursue their varied academic dreams during the settlement process. McDermott (2016) shares the view that libraries can provide resources and education to newcomers. As in previous research (Kikulwe et al., 2017), the pursuit of more education due to the lack of recognition of foreign credentials was described by the study participants as a process of **starting over** in developing their careers, which presented different burdens (e.g., loss of social status, financial challenges, finding suitable childcare, inability to sponsor family members, dealing with racism, juggling work and school, transitioning from school to work), on the one hand. On the other hand, educational institutions became spaces where study participants were exposed to various courses of action, which they could take to lead them to employment and the ultimate fulfillment of their dreams. For example, educational spaces exposed them to new relationships with Canadians. Developing relationships with others not only provided social support but also helped individuals network and build confidence to apply for jobs, continue their education, or start their own businesses. Attending night classes while working was the means for many participants to achieve their educational goals, even though in the interim they were employed in areas that were seen as beneath their knowledge and skills—previously described by Thomas (2015) as survival or transitional employment.

Participants who did not have employment because they were still obtaining their

English skills experienced frustration. Inability to secure employment, especially for newcomer men, has also been described as one of many conditions that can intensify family tension (Bui & Morash, 2008). Family conflict can halt family resilience. Settlement agencies can play a critical role in this service area by providing pre-arrival as well as post-arrival information on maintaining family unity (Giesbrecht et al., 2024) to ensure resilience for this population.

While obtaining their education, securing employment, and, often, learning how to speak English, the participants in our study also depended on their relationships with their spouses or others from their home country. This finding is consistent with Cheung's (2008) study, which found that "increased intimacy and mutual reliance in the couples' marital relationship contributed to the immigrants' resilience in their acculturation and integration" (p. 29). A common sentiment was that as parents (couples or spouses), participants wanted to be successful so that they could help their children succeed and support others in the future. Resilience manifested in the lives of their children, who were succeeding in school and obtaining a Canadian education, an area that was important for all the participants.

Some participants continued to seek relationships with individuals from their home countries, which provided them stability while navigating a period of constant change in the new environment. Cardoso and Thompson (2010) conceptualized resilience as maintenance of cultural relationships and a stronger family unit, which was also demonstrated in this study by the participants' reliance on their spouses and desire to form relationships with individuals from their home countries so they could preserve their cultural capital. Outside of their immediate families, the participants in our study often met people

from similar backgrounds while studying English or in faith-based settings. It was clear that for many participants, attending faith-based settings provided more than just spiritual support: it also provided social support and advice from others on how to navigate the settlement process, therefore facilitating participants' resilience to some degree. Derksen and Teixeira's (2023) research on refugees in a midsized Canadian city similarly reported that religious institutions played a critical role in welcoming and helping individuals in the initial stages of refugee resettlement, aiding in areas such as housing, English-language training, and childcare.

Overall, being resilient was dependent on services available and accessible, specifically settlement services, libraries, and educational and employment programs. Liu et al. (2020) also indicated that formal and informal supports leveraged resiliency for refugees during resettlement. Haugen et al. (2023) stated that more refugee families are choosing to settle in rural communities due to affordability and sense of community; however, these communities lack the resources of the larger cities. In our study, settlement agencies provided refugees with an initial orientation to society in Saskatchewan while other institutions facilitated the ongoing integration and adaptation to local communities and neighbourhoods. Haugen et al. (2023) suggested that policies should be implemented to ensure that newcomers in these communities have access to equitable services that will assist in their integration into Canada. Pulvirenti and Mason (2011) concluded that resilience is a process that can only occur when individuals who have faced adversity are positively supported by others, including communities and service providers.

Study Limitations

Because this is a qualitative study that included only 15 participants, this study is not representative of all refugees' experiences in Saskatchewan, and the findings cannot be generalized. We recognize that there are great variations and differences of experience among refugees, based on language, gender, geography, religion, education, means of entry to Canada (i.e., government-sponsored, private-sponsored, and asylum seekers), and settlement location (e.g., urban vs. rural). One of the study limitations is that it only included participants who were themselves or had a partner in the labour market or post-secondary education (i.e., they were actively connected in the community). As a result, the study excluded individuals with limited education and those who were not working. However, our findings have much to offer in terms of insight into what contributes to resilience for refugees, including resources, supports, and personal qualities. This is important because of the ongoing forced displacements of individuals and families, leading to greater numbers coming to Canada from war-torn countries like Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and others where human rights violations are occurring.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that refugee families who arrive in Canada are very motivated and driven by the desire for a **new life** for themselves, their children, and their families. Participants wanted a new life because they were fleeing oppressive conditions or war in their home countries, as in the recent examples of refugees from war-torn countries like Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan, resulting in greater numbers of refugees. Refugees often sponsor family members to

come to Canada, in part because extended family provides support, especially in the areas of social relationships and childcare.

This qualitative study demonstrates how participants conceptualized resilience in terms of watching their children succeed, building personal confidence, trying new endeavours in employment, studying diligently to achieve new educational standards, and working hard to provide for their families. The goal of refugees entering Canada is to have a new life, but attached to their ideas of a new life is the challenging work to overcome various obstacles and fulfill career aspirations—a process that is not always seamless because of language barriers and lack of recognition of their credentials, critical factors to finding and securing employment.

Settlement agencies provided initial resources in employment, which included obtaining help in preparing résumés, learning how to apply for jobs, and preparing for the interview process. As a smaller city, Regina proved to be advantageous to participants in developing relationships and finding resources in the community, which included formal services such as educational institutions and informal resources from people they met through churches and mosques. In addition, library services provided access to computers, which enabled participants to access resources, apply for employment, become familiar with the city, and complete their Canadian education.

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