

## Reflections on Migration, Resilience, and Graduate Education: Supporting Female Students with Refugee Backgrounds

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### Abstract

Graduate studies may be challenging for refugee women who experience inequities heightened through their multiple and intersecting social identities. However, limited research is available about the experiences of female graduate students and female professors with refugee backgrounds, including the complexities of being women in higher education. Through reflexive ethnography, a process in which researchers become the foci of their scholarship and participate in the construction of their data, we identified the importance of honoring female refugee graduate students' strengths, the urgency of creating safe and inclusive scholarly communities, and the promise of providing a social justice mentoring. In the era of heightened economic and political uncertainty, global environmental crises, and the worldwide forced displacement of people, educators must adopt commitments to social justice. As institutions of higher education, universities are well-positioned to play a leadership role in supporting students with refugee backgrounds through social justice and change-oriented mentoring interventions.

*Keywords:* female students with refugee backgrounds, access to higher education, social justice mentoring, inclusive scholarly communities

### Introduction

In 2019, the number of refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people around the world reached a staggering 70.8 million (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2020a), with women and girls making up 50 percent of any displaced population. The displaced girls and

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women who are “unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled, and elderly are especially vulnerable” (UNHCR 2020b, para. 2) in the process of forced migration, education, and resettlement.

Worldwide, almost 6.5 million refugees are between 19-26 years of age (Slaven, 2018). Young adulthood is a critical time for personal, social, and professional development (Baum et al., 2013). Alarming only 3 percent of displaced young adults are involved in higher education (World Economic Forum, 2019), with females 2.5 times more likely to be displaced from school than males (UNHCR, 2020c). This number falls far below the global rate (38 percent) of youth enrollment in higher education (UNHCR, 2019a). Completion of higher education is associated with personal autonomy, economic independence, civic engagement, and societal advancement (Baum et al., 2013; Statistics Canada, 2017). Fostering higher education goals for youth with refugee backgrounds requires a shift in perception: “Higher education is not a luxury – it is an essential investment for today and the future (UNHCR, 2019b, p. 44).

In response to the refugee crisis, the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) highlighted the urgency to invest in and support refugee education, especially at the tertiary level, recognizing that displacement often suspends and/or interrupts puts refugees’ education and careers (WUSC, 2016). As displaced individuals rebuild their life upon resettlement, education opportunities are vital to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to gain/regain meaningful employment. Education is invaluable in restoring hope and financial stability and enables individuals that have experienced conflict, war, and trauma to contribute to and promote family, community, and nation’s economic growth (Mendenhall et al., 2018; WUSC, 2016).

Higher education institutions are in unique positions to provide leadership in improving and facilitating educational access and opportunities for women with refugee backgrounds by supporting mentoring opportunities in partnership with local, national, and international communities that strive towards the empowerment of women (WUSC, 2016). In 2018, Canada took in 28,100 of 92,400 refugees who were resettled in 25 countries (UNHCR, 2019a). Since 1978, WUSC has enabled more than 1,900

young refugees from 39 countries to engage in postsecondary studies, with the majority enrolling in undergraduate studies (WUSC, 2018a), leaving the potential needs and experiences of graduate students with refugee backgrounds unknown and unexplored.

Graduate-level studies are essential for ongoing knowledge production and mobilization (Ratković & Woloshyn, 2017; Rose, 2013). Graduate studies may be especially challenging for refugee women who may experience inequities heightened through the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, nationality, and refugee status (Ramsay & Baker, 2019; Spark et al., 2013). Limited information is available about the experiences of female graduate students and female professors with refugee backgrounds, including the complexities of being women in higher education (Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

## **Literature Review**

### **Barriers to and Challenges in Higher Education**

The large enrollment gap between students with refugee backgrounds and those without such backgrounds, partially reflects the substantial barriers that individuals with refugee background experience. Refugees report encountering “informational barriers to navigating educational pathways, accessing professional supports, evaluating credentials, financing education, navigating immigration systems, using online resources, delaying their educational progress, and contributing to mental health distress” (Baywa et al., 2017, p. 56). These barriers can be broadly divided into 1) accessing higher education; 2) navigating higher education institutions, and 3) managing non-academic challenges.

### ***Accessing Postsecondary Education***

Many individuals with refugee backgrounds are denied access to higher education due to the lack of academic transcripts and other identity documents that are no longer accessible or lost during displacement. Additional challenges include difficulty with accessing applications and completing admission requirements such as lack of funds and lack of language skills required for engagement in higher education institutions within the host country. Western educational institutes often demonstrate

inflexibility in accommodating individuals who have experienced conflict and trauma, in part, by failing to recognize the human and social capital that refugees obtained in their country of origin (WUSC, 2016; UNHCR, 2019b).

### ***Navigating Higher Education Institutions***

Individuals who gain admission into higher education often experience additional challenges including lack of support services geared towards students with refugee backgrounds; difficulty in adapting to Western style of lectures, teaching, and academic expectations (Loo, 2017); and lack of financial support (Bajwa et al., 2017; Giles, 2018). In many cases, students with refugee backgrounds are required to repeat courses, and in some instances, entire programs of study as host universities do not provide them with credits for education obtained in their country of origin (WUSC, 2016) or adequate support systems while engaged in academic programs (Ernest et al., 2010).

### ***Managing Non-Academic Challenges***

Students from refugee backgrounds are also likely to experience multiple non-academic challenges that could inhibit their learning, such as acculturation challenges, separation from family members, discrimination, social exclusion, mental health challenges, and language barriers as well as informational barriers to accessing professional supports, navigating immigration systems, using online resources, and smoothing their educational progress (Bajwa et al., 2017; Lincoln et al., 2016). To this end, there are increasing calls for higher education institutions to provide supports and culturally informed services (WUSC, 2016).

Collectively, these barriers and challenges may be even greater for women with refugee backgrounds who are often subject to subordination, domestic abuse, and sexual and gender-based violence premigration. These experiences, in turn, make them vulnerable to physical, emotional, and psychological challenges post-migration (Forced Migration Research Network, 2017). Upon resettlement, women have complex needs (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009; Mangrio et al, 2019) that need to be taken into

consideration to foster their academic goals. According to UNHCR (2019), “the social and economic barriers that hold girls back at every stage are also a reality at the level of higher education and demand extra efforts if they are to be overcome” (UNHCR, 2019b, p. 44).

### **Mentoring Women in Higher Education**

Student-professor mentoring and peer-to-peer mentoring for women with refugee backgrounds has the potential to create a sense of safety and belonging that may help them navigate and succeed in higher education. An effective way to support women’s education from conservative communities (as in some cultures women are not permitted to be taught by men) is to be intentional in bridging the gender gap in enrollment concerning both students and instructors in postsecondary education (UNHCR, 2019b). Parents from some cultures are more likely to enroll female children in postsecondary education if they are taught by female professors. Considering the past traumas experienced by many women from refugee backgrounds, female students are likely to be receptive to being mentored by female professors and peers (UNHCR, 2019b).

Unfortunately, finding women mentors in higher education may be challenging. Despite the ongoing implementation of legislation, policies, and practices intended to promote equity, and despite considered advancement in the profession, women remain disproportionately underrepresented and underpaid among the professoriate ranks across many Western and North American countries including Canada. At the same time, more women tend to hold sessional and contract positions than their male colleagues, leaving them vulnerable to unemployment, underemployment and precarious employment. These inequities are especially pronounced for racialized and Indigenous women (CAUT, 2018), and collectively result in academia being a male-dominated and male-privileged environment for many women, refugees, immigrants and other marginalized individuals (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Perry & Mallozzi, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

Female students and scholars often struggle to cope with tensions between their private and professional lives, especially in relation to balancing their family, home, and academic workloads (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). For instance, many women report navigating competing feelings of guilt associated with the beliefs that they need to work as much as possible within the institution to progress in their studies or keep their part-time positions, as well as assume primary roles as caregivers (child and/or elder-care), contribute to family income, and support partner employment (Fritsch, 2015; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2009). These challenges may be especially prevalent among female refugee, immigrant, and second-generation students and early career scholars who often must navigate high expectations for academic success (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2015). For example, in a recent study of Syrian refugee women enrolled in an Ontario university, Ghadban (2018) found that while all participants were committed to university education, they experienced social and emotional difficulties, discrimination, and “an unwelcoming community and cultural tensions resulting in stress and anxiety” (p. 68). This paper focuses on the experiences of women with migration backgrounds, who have forged the way into academia through safe and inclusive scholarly communities.

### **Creating Safe and Inclusive Scholarly Communities**

While considered attention has been given to creating, sustaining, and promoting safe and inclusive elementary and secondary school classrooms for all learners, including students with refugee backgrounds (e.g., Chayder, 2019 in Denmark; Doyran, 2019 in Turkey; Fouskas, 2019 in Greece; Government of Republic of Serbia, 2019 in Serbia; Li et al., 2017; Ratković et al., 2017 in Canada), less attention has been focused on creating safe and inclusive communities within higher education. Students with refugee background are now increasingly moving into higher education. Of the limited work completed within this sector, most of scholarship has been directed in supporting the experiences of refugee students completing their first degrees (e.g., Naidoo et al., 2018). For instance, Wong and Yohani (2016) document the importance of membership in on-campus and off-campus support groups for

undergraduate students who enter Canadian universities directly from refugee camps. In Australia, researchers have explored undergraduate student challenges, needs, and aspirations (e.g., Naidoo et al., 2015; Wilkinson et al., 2017); student levels of motivation and instructor support (e.g., Hirano, 2014); and the importance of agency, resilience, autonomy, and community support (e.g., Gateley, 2015). However, limited studies have explored ways in which to support and enhance the experiences of graduate-level students from refugee backgrounds. Graduate-level studies differ from undergraduate programming in several critical ways including the minimization of course work and in-class experiences with counter increases in independent learning and scholarship, faculty and peer mentorship, collegial relationships, and engagement in scholarly communities (Ratković & Woloshyn, 2017; Teeuwsen et al., 2012). In context of these pedagogical and learning differences, we argue that building supportive and inclusive communities beyond the classroom is imperative for success within graduate-level education.

Terry et al., (2016) call for a comprehensive analysis of refugee student experiences within the higher education sector in terms of location, gender, and community. Responding to this call, we engage with the literature in the field and our personal and professional narratives of migration, education, and scholarship. Researchers have further identified academic, self-advocacy, social-emotional connectedness (Fedynich et al., 2016), mentoring (Hu et al., 2008; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), caring relationships, academic accommodations, on-campus resources, and inclusive and safe classrooms (Woloshyn et al., 2019) as driving forces of graduate student success and well-being for individuals without refugee backgrounds. In this paper, we argue that these positive and supportive relationships, places, and spaces are equally as important when working with graduate-level students with refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, we argue that these forces can be enhanced by moving from classroom engagement to community building. Using a reflexive ethnography design, we participate in the collaborative exploration of how our individual critical transformative experiences have worked to shape our beliefs and practices as postsecondary educators. The following research question shapes the study

described here: How can the lived educational experiences of refugee, immigrant, and second-generation professors provide insights about supporting female graduate students from refugee backgrounds?

### **Method**

We are three female instructors with refugee (Snežana), immigrant (Bharati), and second-generation immigrant (Vera) backgrounds. We explore our personal and pedagogical narratives of migration and resilience as they relate to learning, teaching, and mentoring in graduate education. With backgrounds in education (Snežana, Vera) and the helping professions (Vera, Bharati), we adopt a transdisciplinary pedagogical approach to explore how we may support learning and socialization of female graduate students with refugee backgrounds. We also acknowledge our individual experiences of privilege and/or marginalization. For instance, while Bharati has experienced multiple intersecting oppressions as an immigrant woman and scholar of colour, Vera and Snežana recognize their privileged position of being European-Canadian women. We are all aware that the complexity of our location in a “white capitalist patriarchy” (Deliofsky, 2010, p. 3) and academia must be understood through the intersections of class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, and immigrant status.

Following the principles of reflexive ethnography, we first examined our experiences, beliefs, and cultural identities using semi-structured reflective processes to share and deconstruct our individual and familial experiences as displaced persons and scholars (Enfield & Stasz, 2011; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Defined as neither fully methodology or rhetoric, reflexive ethnography is a process in which researchers become the foci of their scholarship and participate in the construction of their data (Enfield & Stasz, 2011). With a focus on autoethnography and the examination of our experiences and identities as scholars as cultural phenomena, we acknowledge the reciprocal ways in which our research affects our contexts and sense of selves (Ellis, 2004, 2011). Through the process of reflective analysis, we generated personal and collective insights into the context and processes of our evolving experiences as refugee,



immigrant, and second-generation scholars. While we adhered to autoethnographic, reflexive processes, we did not strictly produce full narrative, ethnographic, and/or autobiographical products.

We believe that through the process of personal and collective inquiry, we come to offer important understandings and insights for supporting the aspirations of female graduate students with refugee backgrounds in higher education. By sharing critical and transformative instances, we identify the importance of honoring female refugee graduate students' gifts, talents, and strengths as related to their dreams for higher education and professional identity. We discuss creating safe and inclusive spaces for supporting the women's learning needs and desires. We acknowledge an unwavering belief in female graduate students' abilities and capacities, their knowledge and skills, and the urgencies for creating relevant and meaningful opportunities for their professional growth and academic success.

### **Reflections and Discussion**

#### **The Collaborative Research Center (Snežana and Vera)**

We recognize that our memberships in inclusive communities were particularly formative and critical in shaping our knowledge, skills, and identities as female graduate students, instructors, and scholars. One of such community was a collaborative research center. The center was developed and managed by a diverse group of female faculty, staff, and students who differed in seniority, rank, and geo-political and socio-cultural backgrounds but were united in their commitment to supporting and mentoring each other as scholars and women within academia (Richards et al., 2001).

Membership in the collaborative research center also provided additional opportunities to engage in divergent research projects. Snežana's entry into the Canadian higher education context was marked by her participation in one such longitudinal research project. Engagement in the collaborative center and associated projects increased her sense of competence and scholarly identity. For instance, members of the center worked collaboratively to support each other's scholarly writing and production activities. Open invitations were extended to engage in research and publishing activities, with authorship

negotiated and shared across projects. For Snežana, these opportunities translated into critical vita-building opportunities, research skill development, and Canadian work experiences. Much of this work involved paid employment. These experiences differ from the more common, and less viable, voluntary and other unpaid positions available to students with refugee backgrounds (e.g., Murray, et al, 2014), promoting Snežana's sense of autonomy and her sense of belonging in the center, academia, and Canadian society.

I am a refugee woman, a high school science teacher, a poet, and a migration scholar from the former Yugoslavia who immigrated to Ontario, Canada in 1998 after the war in the country. I arrived in Canada with my husband and two sons (four and 10 years old), leaving behind my family and all my social and professional networks. I did not speak English. My teaching credentials and work experiences were dismissed. I started my employment in Ontario cleaning motel rooms, delivering newspapers, and selling coffee and donuts. Remembering my roots, my parents' endless love for education, and my passion for teaching and lifelong learning, I enrolled in an Intensive English Language program in the fall of 1999, and then in a Bachelor of Science in Biotechnology program in 2000. These studies led to a research assistant position in a Faculty of Education.

Those who I worked with during my research assistantships encouraged me to apply to the Master of Education degree program at the university. Given that I had started my master's degree in biochemistry back home, this felt a natural progression for me, and it was a way to preserve my connection with the teaching profession. Since my mark average was reduced [from 86 percent] to 70 percent, my application to the master's program was rejected. My knowledges were rendered as subjugated knowledges; "hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity" (Foucault, 2003, p. 7). Two colleagues from

our research team, however, found this rejection unjust and wrote recommendation letters for me. I subsequently was accepted into the graduate program. (Ratković, 2011, p. 200).

As a refugee woman, I recognize the importance of believing in talents, capacities, and resilience of female graduate students with refugee backgrounds. I embrace asset-based pedagogies and recognition theory principles (Honneth, 1995) in my teaching practice. As I moved from exile in 1998 to academia in 2000, I remained deeply indebted to my mentors, and I pay their support forward. I honor my students' pre-migration, migration, and post-migration experiences, knowledges, and identities. I supervise and mentor refugee, immigrant, and international students who are interested in migration issues or fail to find a supervisor, building a community of love, rights, and solidarity.

Snežana's refugee journey interrupted her life and professional identity. At her arrival in Canada, educational authorities in Ontario dismissed Snežana's teaching credentials and work experiences. She started her Canadian work experience as a chambermaid in an Ontario motel. In this context of deskilling, resume and vita-building opportunities within the collaborative research center were vital for Snežana's professional and personal growth. She felt that the center provided a safe forum for members to openly share their scholarship without fear of negative critique, evaluation, or judgment. In these ways, the center worked to honor all members' areas of expertise, skills, gifts, and talents, mentoring each other and building a community of love (emotional recognition), rights (legal recognition), and solidarity (shared values) (Honneth, 1995). Love, rights, and solidarity constitute the social conditions under which humans can develop self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, becoming autonomous and goal-oriented beings. Honneth (1995) emphasizes the importance of these three forms of recognition in building symmetrical (rather than hierarchical) esteem between individuals:

To esteem one another symmetrically means to view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis. Relationships of this sort

can be said to be cases of “solidarity,” because they inspire not just passive tolerance but felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person. For only to the degree to which I actively care about the development of the other's characteristics (which seem foreign to me) can our shared goals be realized. (p. 129)

Mirroring Honneth's (1995) active care about the development of the other's characteristics, Snežana's center colleagues and research team members assisted her in obtaining, initially denied, access to graduate education while demonstrating the need for, and the value of, asset-based, flexible, and caring approaches to refugee student education. For students with refugee backgrounds, education is not only an academic journey but also a bridge to social and professional integration in the host society (e.g., Gordon, 2018). Moreover, “investing in the education of the highly talented and driven migrants and refugees can boost development and economic growth not only in host countries but also countries of origin” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 7). Only by a social group collective attempt to establish symmetrical esteem communities and reciprocal recognition within these communities, such as the collaborative research center described above, educators and scholars can shape institutional policies and practices and initiate “the normatively directional change of societies” (Honneth, 1995, p. 93), shifting the field of higher education towards solidarity, social justice, and equity.

Vera was provided with a unique opportunity to participate in a collaborative research center early in her scholarly career. Finding such an accepting space and place was especially important for Vera as a child of refugee parents whose early academic journey included multiple experiences of social-cultural and linguistic tensions and challenges.

I am an only child of older parents (now deceased) who immigrated to Canada from Europe after World War II as young adults. Like many other trauma survivors whose lives interrupted by war and political unrest, they engaged in protective closed-family behaviors, viewed the outside world

with caution, and perceived education as a vehicle for autonomy, safety, and a better future (Goodman, 2013; Stewart, 2012).

As a child and young adult, I was keenly aware that our family's behaviors differed from those of the dominant culture. My working parents' heavy accents were deemed problematic and seemingly well-intentioned educators deterred them from speaking their first languages and abandoning their cultural practices in order to preserve my potential for academic success. In these and other ways, I was acculturated to consider my cultural heritage as unsophisticated and crude, promoting feelings of stress, shame, and isolation (Rogers-Sirin et al., 2014).

As a young adult, I was left largely to my own devices to navigate and resolve social-cultural uncertainties and linguistic challenges that marked entry into the highly coveted realm of higher education. Like other first- and second-generation university students, I experienced performance anxiety accentuated with feelings of guilt (financial and other) (Bell & Santamaría, 2018). These feelings remained familiar companions throughout my graduate studies despite the presence of sympathetic and supportive mentors and peers, who while empathetic, had family experiences that were markedly different from my own.

These tensions and doubts remained as I accepted a faculty position in an unfamiliar institution. Through good fortune, I was embraced by other female colleagues who were committed to challenging institutional norms that often worked to marginalize women and other minorities through the creation of an inclusive, safe, and inviting space that promoted, supported, and encouraged diversity in scholarship. In this space and place, I could openly share my concerns about my abilities to succeed academically and unabashedly present my emerging scholarship for constructive feedback. I could lament about the competing demands associated with caring for a young family (and eventually aging parents) without fear of negative appraisals or repercussions.

I found strength in the courage of others, insights and inspiration in their experiences and successes, and comfort in the shared experience of being female scholars.

Refugee, immigrant, and second-generation students and scholars often face linguistic and socio-cultural barriers within higher education (Kanno & Varghese, 2010; Perry & Mallozzi, 2016; Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Limited or restricted opportunities to engage in extended scholarly activities are especially detrimental to refugees, as well as first- and second-generation immigrant graduate students who typically enter the competitive North American job market without the benefits of extensive social networks or relevant prior experience. The professional experiences and credentials of refugees are often unrecognized, challenged, and even discredited within host countries (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2018; Ratković, 2011, 2013). Even when professional experiences and credentials are recognized, expectations for field-related work experiences within the host country serve as additional barriers to the attainment of meaningful employment (Colakoglu et al., 2018). Moreover, female immigrants are more likely to face unemployment or underemployment than male immigrants (Al Ariss, 2010; van den Bergh & Du Plessis, 2012).

Many North American scholars hold deficit-based beliefs about refugee, immigrant, and second-generation students' English-language and research-related capacities (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017). These concerns, in turn, transfer into a general reluctance to mentor, supervise, and/or hire these individuals due to concerns related to time and effort to support their writing and scholarly contributions. Recognizing this reluctance, and building on our personal experiences and insights, we have embraced an asset-based, recognition approach to teaching and mentoring graduate students, especially those with refugee backgrounds. As insiders/outsideers to our graduate students' experiences, we nurture and model trust in our students' pre-migration knowledge, skills, and capacities by encouraging them to build their academic work on their migrant, cross-cultural experiences, knowledges, and aspirations. Moreover, we are committed to offering additional support and resources to students including multiple reviews of

course papers, frequent consultations, and research and scholarly opportunities (e.g., research assistantship, conference participation, and publication).

### **Social Justice Mentoring (Bharati)**

My story is the story of a girl from a faraway land - India. It is a story of patriarchy. It is a story of violence. It is the story of trauma and survival. I am grateful to Canada for protecting me in her womb. Sadly, I also experienced multiple intersecting oppressions from those who could not bear to see my racialized immigrant body occupy space as an academic. And "when bodies take up spaces they are not intended to inhabit, something other than historical reproduction can happen, new and different literacies are performed and lived" (Hughes, 2016, p. 132).

Similar to Snežana and Vera, when I look back at my academic journey, I feel gratitude to the mentors along the way. Their torch of supportive mentoring helped me navigate through different socio-political power structures all through my undergraduate and graduate degrees and later to fulfill my tenured requirements. While my experiences in the academy have largely been positive, as a racialized immigrant woman in a predominantly white institution, I have also experienced racism, microaggressions, and othering from administration, faculty, and students. My experiences of marginalization are not unique. Racialized faculty and students routinely face structural barriers to career advancement (Childs & Johnson, 2018; Taskforce on Anti-Racism at Ryerson, 2010).

My lived experiences of oppressions have created within me an acute awareness of social justice issues that affect vulnerable populations and have sharpened my insights about the lives of immigrants and refugees, especially women. I use my lived experiences in India and Canada to further the cause of equity, diversity, and inclusion. In the past five years, I have had the opportunity to address diversity and inclusion at an Ontario college at the departmental level, campus level, and the larger community.

As a member of College's Equity and Diversity committees, I have observed that there has been a current push for post-secondary institutes to indigenize their institutions by diversifying their faculty and student body (Coburn, 2018). However, research from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT, 2018) suggests that universities are falling behind these expectations; postsecondary institutions are not representative of the increasingly culturally and racially diverse Canadian society. Due to their complex socio-economic/political context, education integration of students from refugee backgrounds require supports beyond access to quality education to ensure that their environment is safe and welcoming and that the students feel valued (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019).

A social justice mentoring lens that "emphasizes equal access to resources, dissolution of power hierarchies, and the empowerment and promotion of wellness among marginalized populations" (Albright et al., 2017, p. 364) would be effective in mentoring underrepresented students in the academy. Studies on mentoring suggest that social justice training is important for mentors to support mentees from a different cultural background "to facilitate the development of sociopolitical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and self-efficacy for race equity" (Anderson et al. 2017, p. 1104). Such training should include the mentor reflecting on self-biases, ideologies, and privileges, the role of systemic and structural factors in mentee's lives (such as power, oppression, inequality, and various isms) and discussions on race equity (Anderson et al. 2017).

In my teaching, research, and mentoring I focus on culture as fluid (rather than static), engage in self-reflection as a life-long learner, recognize and challenge the power imbalances that exist between a mentor-mentee relationship, and understand that individual and institutional accountability is necessary to create change at the individual, structural, and institutional level (Fisher-Borne et al., 2015; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). While there were no formal or structured mentoring programs as I navigated my doctoral journey, the most inspirational support



that my mentor, a racialized woman with a refugee background, provided was a safe and engaging space that built trust between us. Her one-to-one informal mentoring was instrumental in enhancing my research efficacy, self-esteem, and independence, building leadership skills and promoting social connectedness. Her ongoing mentoring has positively influenced my career trajectory (Beech et al., 2013). Having a mentor who has similar racialized and gendered experiences can make the postsecondary experience easier for new students and can motivate them to complete their education and move on to graduate studies (Calabrese & Zoledziowski, 2018). Nevertheless, as a junior faculty, I have found it arduous to bear the emotional labor of supporting racialized students and addressing diversity issues in the academy. My mentor's fatigued body slumped on a chair at 7 p.m. with piles of papers on her desk that needed attention flashes before my eyes whenever another racialized student who is not even part of my department emails me for support.

It is my firm belief that mentoring is vital for enhancing the academic efficacy and confidence of students. A unique role that I have recently assumed straddles both teaching and community service. In partnership with a community-based employment agency, I have created opportunities to mentor Internationally Trained Professionals and involved them in research projects, conference presentations, and grant applications.

Chan (2018) highlights the following mentor characteristics for nurturing trust within cross-cultural mentoring relationships: “listening, maintaining excellent communication, having a holistic understanding of the protégé, self-disclosing, using humor, being willing to discuss race and culture, acknowledging mistakes, and behaving with integrity” (p. 4). Racialized professors carry the extra load of mentoring other racialized students and addressing issues of race and racism due to the lack of racially representative faculty (Zoledziowski, 2018). Studies have documented the importance of institutional responsibility to develop formal mentoring programs that assign relationships (e.g., student-faculty and

junior faculty-senior faculty) and have “goals, schedules, training (for mentors and mentees) and evaluation” (McLaughlin, 2010, p. 876). Without formal mentoring programs, the informal mentoring of faculty and students can be viewed by the institution and other faculty as a distraction from teaching, publishing, and committee work. Beech et al. (2013) make a poignant statement: “Ultimately, these programs also affect the academic institutions (organizational level) because mentoring influences faculty satisfaction and retention” (p. 4).

### **Paying it Forward**

For us, membership in collaborative centers and projects provided opportunities to obtain Canadian education, find meaningful employment within academia, and engage in vita- enhancing activities and experiences, which in turn, supported our career opportunities. Engagement in these inclusive and collaborative endeavors provided informal opportunities for the sharing of personal and professional struggles, coping strategies, and successes. These initiatives provided spaces in which to share our complex narratives including our often competing familial, financial, social, and emotional roles and responsibilities as shaped through our experiences and identities as scholars, mothers, partners, and caregivers. As part of these discussions, we gained invaluable knowledge about available resources within the institution and community-at-large. These experiences opened opportunities for increased networking and socialization furthering a broader sense of belonging within the community and host country.

The impacts of membership in these safe and inclusive collaborative communities in which we experienced unconditional regard and acceptance as competent individuals, scholars, and researchers have extended into our daily work as scholars, instructors, and graduate student supervisors within the institution. We are committed to our engagements in labor intensive, time-consuming, and rewarding (formal and informal) mentorship that afford academic coaching, skill training, and language support while facilitating students’ sense of agency and socialization into academia and Canada. We recognize the

need to humanize our relationship with students by sharing our professional and personal struggles, coping strategies, and successes to create rapport, reciprocity, and community.

We have learned that safety, inclusion, and community building must extend beyond the classroom into institutional, local, national, and international settings and communities. This shift can be achieved by engaging female graduate students with refugee backgrounds and their supervisors and mentors in university research centers, university-wide initiatives, community-based local research and development projects, and national and international academic, scholarly, and professional initiatives. In this context, willingness to engage with female refugee graduate students over time, and on a regular basis, is critical. Such engagement may include formal mentoring programs where institutions can pair new students with their peers who have progressed further in their studies. Students can be paired with faculty and peers to help them navigate the university and Canadian culture. Similarly, new faculty can be teamed with experienced colleagues to provide peer support, guidance, and practice knowledge that will help mentees navigate the challenges of their new environment (Beech et al., 2013). To avoid the danger of viewing the informal (and formal) mentoring of faculty and students as a distraction from teaching, research, and service, creative mentoring approaches and processes—based on love, rights, and solidarity—must be developed and promoted. The development of safe and inclusive spaces can break traditional patterns of isolation and competition that are typical within higher education and that may be detrimental to the experiences of female graduate students and scholars with refugee backgrounds.

Our stories of higher education are intricately connected to our narratives about resettlement (Ghadban, 2018) and integration within Canadian social, political, and economic context. Snežana progressed from being a graduate student and research assistant to becoming a research officer, an instructor, and a scholar. Bharati achieved promotion and is a tenured professor. Vera continued with her progression through the ranks. We have gained considerable experiences as instructors, graduate student supervisors, and scholars.

In the era of heightened economic and political uncertainty, global environmental crises, and the worldwide forced displacement of people, we believe that there is an urgency to adopt local, national, and global commitments to social justice. As institutions of higher learning, universities are well-positioned to play a nurturing role in shining a torch to light the education path for students with refugee backgrounds through social justice and change-oriented mentoring interventions (Albright et al., 2017).

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