

Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Education Faculty Articles and Research

Attallah College of Educational Studies

8-2-2023

Migrant and Refugee Women: A Case for Community Leadership

Whitney McIntyre Miller

Chapman University, wmcintyr@chapman.edu

Rabab Atwi

Chapman University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/education_articles



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Leadership Studies Commons](#), [Migration Studies Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McIntyre Miller, W., & Atwi, R. (2023), Migrant and refugee women: A case for community leadership. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 17, 47-52. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21858>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Attallah College of Educational Studies at Chapman University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Faculty Articles and Research by an authorized administrator of Chapman University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact laughtin@chapman.edu.

Migrant and Refugee Women: A Case for Community Leadership

Comments

This article was originally published in *Journal of Leadership Studies*, volume 17, in 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21858>

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Copyright

The authors

MIGRANT AND REFUGEE WOMEN: A CASE FOR COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

WHITNEY MCINTYRE MILLER  AND RABAB ATWI

Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA

The current paper posits that forced migration, as seen as a movement through a liminal space, provides the opportunity for refugee women to build upon their resilience and create social capital to find new ways and spaces to engage in community leadership. Escalating conflict in different parts of the world has led millions of people to flee their homelands in search of safety and protection. Based on recent statistics shared by the World Bank, more than 100 million people were forcibly displaced by May 2022, and two-thirds of the world's poor population is expected to live in settings dominated by conflict and violence by 2030 (World Bank, 2022). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023) estimated that women and girls comprise around 50% of any refugee population; the percentage grows even larger when all refugee children are included.

While political conflict negatively impacts all individuals, women encounter a disproportionate level of psychological and physical challenges during forced migration. These include changes to economic and

employment status, opportunities, and expectations (Canefe, 2018); separation from family members (Asaf, 2017); lack of appropriate accommodations (Amnesty International, 2016); sexual exploitation and harassment (Charles & Denman, 2013); and domestic violence at the hands of their male partners who often lash out in anger and frustration (Andrabi, 2019; El-Masri et al., 2013). Women who are disabled, pregnant, heads of households, or elderly are especially vulnerable to violence and discrimination (UNHCR, 2023).

Therefore, the impacts of forced migration are far more significant for women than men as they transition from their homes to a new, and often quite different, situation. This period of liminality, or the space between, enables opportunities for the new realities in which migrant and refugee women find themselves to lean into the resilience they develop and the social networks they create to find new opportunities, both formal and informal, for leadership. This argument is presented in the following pages.

Correspondence: Whitney McIntyre Miller, Attallah College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA. E-mail: wmcintyr@chapman.edu

Liminality in Migration

In many ways, refugee and migrant women face a time of liminality as they are forced to transition from the context that they once knew to an entirely new one. Liminality is the space between the past that is known and the future that is yet to be known (Turner, 1992). It is within this space, or the in-between, where change and transition take place, where unpredictability and uncertainty, including feelings of dread or exhilaration, tend to lead the way (Turner, 1992; Voegelin, 1990).

Classically, Lewin (1951) referred to a notion of change as being where things are unfrozen, changed, and then refrozen. In many ways, liminality is, indeed, the space between the unfrozen and the refrozen. It is a fluid boundary-crossing of sorts where norms are challenged, and beliefs, habits, and practices shift (McIntyre Miller & Harter, 2015). Liminality can be viewed as a transition through a crisis (McIntyre Miller & Harter, 2015), although one might argue that change is never truly over, and in fact, as we move from one reality to another, we are still engaged in the inherent whitewater in which we regularly exist (Vaill, 1989).

Despite this, liminality can be seen as the bridge between two known realities (Simmel, 1955) or a platform for societal change (Mälksoo, 2012). War, or other conflicts, is inherently liminal, resulting in the ending of the existing order and the unknown of what will emerge (Leed, 1981; Mälksoo, 2012; Neumann, 2012). There is no clear point at which liminality begins or ends, but rather it is the drive toward a new worldview and a new way of existing (Mälksoo, 2012; McIntyre Miller & Harter, 2015). Liminality is not an outright replacement of one reality with another, nor is it always for the better (McIntyre Miller & Harter, 2015). It is, ultimately, a time that allows for the scrutinization of former ways of being and the space for reflection and growth toward shifted and new ways of being.

Strengths of Migrant and Refugee Women

Women who are forced to flee from their countries of origin experience a sense of liminality as they move from a former reality to a new one. Women in these situations are often viewed by the psychological and

physical challenges that highlight their trauma, vulnerabilities, and suffering, such as those mentioned above. There is a shift afoot, however, where scholars and advocates (e.g., Chung et al., 2013; Ferris, 2020; Sherwood & Liebling-Kalifani, 2012) are calling, instead, for a focus on the endurance, attributes, and strengths of refugee and migrant women. This includes the formal and informal sources of support women seek as they learn to adapt to these new environments. These supports often include family members, members from their coethnic communities, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations. It is within and among these supports that migrant women build resilience, social capital, and leadership skills, as described below.

RESILIENCE

Despite the grave challenges they must overcome, refugee women across the globe have demonstrated remarkable resilience during their resettlement journey and after they settle in host communities. The concept of resilience has been explored across various disciplines and contexts. Although researchers have yet to establish a clear definition of resilience, it has become more widely accepted that resilience is a dynamic and complex process (Hawkes et al., 2021; Stainton et al., 2019). In their review of the extant research on resilience, Sisto et al. (2019) concluded that resilience involves the “ability to overcome the difficulties experienced in the different areas of one’s life with perseverance, as well as a good awareness of oneself and one’s internal coherence by activating a personal growth project” (p. 1). Stainton et al. (2019) added that resilient people use protective resources and factors to their advantage. Hence, based on these conceptualizations of resilience, it could be argued that a fundamental aspect of resilience is the individuals’ capacity to utilize their inner and external resources to endure the hardships they encounter in life.

An increasing body of research has investigated the protective factors that contribute to the resilience of refugee women in the face of adversity. Based on the findings of these international studies, motherhood (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Veronese et al., 2021), faith (Al-Natour et al., 2019; Boswall & Akash, 2015; Hasan et al., 2018), and social support (El-Khani

et al., 2017; Hynie et al., 2011) are some of the critical assets embodied by refugee women to reinforce and enhance their resilience. As previously mentioned, social supports come in a variety of forms, helping develop the social capital that refugee women create as they rebuild their lives in a new and often unfamiliar environment.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

In the context of forced migration, social capital has emerged as a valuable source for forcibly displaced women. McMichael and Manderson (2004) conceptualized that social capital includes “the web of connections, loyalties, investments, and mutual obligations that develop among people” (p. 89). Additionally, Putnam (2000) explained that “the core idea of social capital is that social networks have a value” (p. 18). Stewart et al. (2008) further expounded that social support includes emergency services, charitable donations, aid for initial settlement, and job search assistance.

Social capital is one of the protective factors on which refugee women rely to compensate for the breaking of familial and community networks after they escape the persecution experienced in their home countries to foreign countries. A qualitative study of refugee women who resettled in Tasmania, Australia, conducted by Hawkes et al. (2021) revealed that connecting with community members enabled refugee women to maintain ties with their language and culture. In a grounded theory examination of refugee women who resettled in the city of Hamilton, Canada, Chung et al. (2013) showed that community assistance promotes the resilience of refugees, particularly newcomers, by providing coping mechanisms through support, resources, social networks, and encouragement. Most newcomers viewed those who came to migrate before them as an important source of support because they had first-hand knowledge of the settlement process and the host country’s culture (Chung et al., 2013). Based on the findings of these international studies, it could be argued that social capital is vital for facilitating the liminal transition of refugee women from one cultural space into another.

The coethnic community is another instrumental asset for refugee women during the postsettlement phase. McMichael and Manderson (2004) conducted

a study that drew on ethnographic data to explore the effect of social capital on the well-being of women in Australia. The study revealed that social support from the community and family members could potentially contribute to the improved psychological well-being of refugee women in Somalia. These findings were further confirmed by more recent studies, which revealed that the ongoing connection with a community from their own cultural background gave refugee women a sense of belonging (Chung et al., 2013) and facilitated their access to social support (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). All these benefits often lead refugees to stay within their own ethnic communities in order to maintain adequate support (Simich et al., 2005).

In addition to their coethnic community, maintaining a social network of family members and neighbors is another instrumental source of social capital for forcibly displaced women. Newcomers often turn to friends, family members, and peers before going to ethnic-specific organizations (Hynie et al., 2011), positively contributing to their well-being (Simich et al., 2005). Additionally, the cultural networks women create with other females, including grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, also play a critical role in sustaining women’s accountability and responsibility toward their children (Tushabe & Muhonja, 2015). In addition to friends and family members, women often widen their social networks by establishing personal neighborhood networks with neighbors to restore their pre-resettlement routines (El-Khani et al., 2017).

LEADERSHIP

Therefore, one might argue that travel through liminality, along with the resilience of refugee women and their ability to build social capital, provides the space for new leadership to emerge, that which can adapt and change as realities and communities do (McIntyre Miller & Harter, 2015). In the case of women who face forced migration, this may provide new opportunities for leadership that may not have been possible before. It may be that roles, both formal and informal, not previously open to women now present themselves. It may also be that women who have not sought these opportunities, even if they were available, now find the space, desire, or need to do so.

To date, there is limited research on migrant and refugee women taking up leadership roles in new community spaces. The work of Denzongpa and Nichols (2020) demonstrated through a single-case study that migrant women's experiences can become lessons and opportunities for their community, and they can use both informal and formal leadership roles as ways to inspire others. Hatzidimitriadou and Çakir (2009) also found that when women engaged in community-based groups, they felt more empowered to communicate their needs, and those of their children, with their host nations. In addition, results showed that community-engaged migrant women served as positive role models both for their own families and for their community. While evidence exists that migrant women can and do take up community leadership roles, there is still a significant gap that could be further explored to understand these practices and opportunities better.

Implications for Policy and Practice

While increased scholarship in the area of migrant and refugee women and the role of resilience, social capital building, and community leadership is still necessary, it is possible to provide some implications for policy and practice for those within or who work with migrant communities. Research demonstrates that migrant and refugee women who create spaces and organizations with each other find opportunities to have a greater sense of belonging and agency for themselves and others. These spaces can be built from grassroots activism and self-empowerment (Bailey, 2012). In order to create these spaces, it is important to investigate not only *what* factors promote greater coping and resilience in refugee women but also *how* these factors help refugee women adapt (Shishehgar et al., 2017).

As women build their agency and take up roles that may not have been common in their home cultures, they may experience pushback from those who stand by the dominant and often patriarchal norms of their culture. In these cases, more attention should be focused on programming that increases empowerment among these women and enables them to participate to a greater extent in the societies that host them (Kihato, 2007; Williams & Labonte, 2007). It is of the utmost importance, however, to employ cultural

sensitivity when developing programs and initiatives to promote the well-being of refugee women (Boswall & Akash, 2015; Darychuk & Jackson, 2015; Hynie et al., 2011).

While increasing social support and opportunities for empowerment is important in minimizing migrant women's feelings of rejection, "social capital cannot, on its own, substitute for more formal resources" (Chung et al., 2013, p. 72). As such, both formal and informal sources of support should be available to promote women's resilience (Chung et al., 2013), and efforts should be made to support refugee women in regaining lost resources (Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center, 2022). Therefore, finding organizational resources, such as community grants, to empower refugee women to engage in leadership roles is also of paramount importance (Denzongpa & Nichols, 2020). Leadership development and community advocacy programs may also help to add to the skillset of migrant and refugee women.

Despite the need for additional scholarship, what is currently clear is that refugee and migrant women are incredibly resilient and can build social capital in an unfamiliar environment. The journey through liminality, while often burdened with extreme hardship, provides the opportunity for women's strengths to emerge. With the assistance of their networks and the assistance of grassroots and other organizations, migrant and refugee women can find new ways to take up leadership roles and serve as models for others on ways to create supportive community spaces.

Migrant and refugee women are strong and fierce and find ways to move through and beyond trauma while creating spaces for each other and for their children to thrive. In many cases, host communities do not access the incredible wealth that these women bring into their neighborhoods and communities, forcing them to establish networks and collaboratives with limited support. Despite these challenges, migrant and refugee women adapt to these new environments, develop their own leadership capacities, and build a new home with a view to the future. Migrant and refugee women, therefore, can and should be seen as a source of inspiration and strength—as exemplars of transitioning through the liminal experience and emerging as resilient community leaders.

References

- Al-Natour, A., Al-Ostaz, S. M., & Morris, E. J. (2019). Marital violence during war conflict: The lived experience of Syrian refugee women. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 30*(1), 32–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659618783842>
- Amnesty International. (2016). *Why do refugee women from Syria in Lebanon face constant sexual harassment and exploitation?* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/02/why-refugee-women-syria-lebanon-face-sexual-harassment-exploitation/>
- Andrabi, S. (2019). New wars, new victimhood, and new ways of overcoming it. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 8*(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.665>
- Asaf, Y. (2017). Syrian women and the refugee crisis: Surviving the conflict, building peace, and taking new gender roles. *Social Sciences, 6*(3), 110. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci6030110>
- Bailey, O. G. (2012). Migrant African women: Tales of agency and belonging. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 35*(5), 850–867. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.628037>
- Boswall, K., & Akash, R. (2015). Personal perspectives of protracted displacement: An ethnographic insight into the isolation and coping mechanisms of Syrian women and girls living as urban refugees in northern Jordan. *Intervention: Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas, 13*(3), 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1097/WTF.0000000000000097>
- Canefe, N. (2018). Invisible lives: Gender, dispossession, and precarity amongst Syrian refugee women in the Middle East. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees, 34*(1), 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050853ar>
- Charles, L., & Denman, K. (2013). Syrian and Palestinian Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The plight of women and children. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 14*(5), 96–111. <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss5/7>
- Chung, K., Hong, E., & Newbold, B. (2013). Resilience among single adult female refugees in Hamilton, Ontario. *Refuge, 29*(1), 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.37507>
- Darychuk, A., & Jackson, S. (2015). Understanding community resilience through the accounts of women living in West Bank refugee camps. *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work, 30*(4), 447–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109915572845>
- Denzongpa, K., & Nichols, T. (2020). We can't step back: Women specially ... a narrative case study on resilience, independence, and leadership of a Bhutanese refugee woman. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 35*(1), 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109919871266>
- El-Khani, A., Ulph, F., Peters, S., & Calam, R. (2017). Syria: Coping mechanisms utilized by displaced refugee parents caring for their children in pre-resettlement contexts. *Intervention: Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas, 15*(1), 34–50. <https://doi.org/10.1097/WTF.0000000000000136>
- El-Masri, R., Harvey, C., & Garwood, R. (2013). *Shifting sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon joint research report*. ABAAD—Resource Centre for Gender Equality and Oxfam GB.
- Ferris, E. (2020, April 13). *Seeing refugee women as resources, not as victims*. GIWPS. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/seeing-refugee-women-as-resources-not-as-victims>
- Hasan, N., Mitschke, D. B., & Ravi, K. E. (2018). Exploring the role of faith in resettlement among Muslim Syrian refugees. *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 37*, 223–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2018.1461045>
- Hatzidimitriadou, E., & Çakir, S. (2009). Community activism and empowerment of Turkish-speaking migrant women in London. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, 5*(1), 34–46. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17479894200900005>
- Hawkes, C., Norris, K., Joyce, J., & Paton, D. (2021). Exploring resilience, coping and wellbeing in women of refugee background resettled in regional Australia. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 704570. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.704570>
- Hynie, M., Crooks, V. A., & Barragan, J. (2011). Immigrant and refugee social networks: Determinants and consequences of social support among women newcomers to Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Nursing Research, 43*(4), 26–46.
- Kihato, C. W. (2007). Invisible lives, inaudible voices?: The social conditions of migrant women in Johannesburg. *African Identities, 5*(1), 89–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725840701253787>
- Leed, E. (1981). *No man's land: Combat and identity in World War I*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. Harper & Row.
- Mälksoo, M. (2012). The challenge of liminality for international relations theory. *Review of International Studies, 38*, 481–494. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000829>
- McIntyre Miller, W., & Harter, N. (2015). Liminality and community leadership: Transitioning leadership in postconflict in Sierra Leone. *International Leadership Journal, 7*(1), 3–22. http://www.tesc.edu/documents/ILJ_Winter_2015.pdf
- McMichael, C., & Manderson, L. (2004). Somali women and well-being: Social networks and social capital among immigrant women in Australia. *Human Organization, 63*(1), 88–99. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.63.1.nwlpj4d4l9756l>

- Neumann, I. (2012). Introduction to the forum on liminality. *Review of International Studies*, 38, 473–479. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000817>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of the American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center (RHTAC) (2022). *Resilience and coping*. RHTAC. <https://refugeehealthta.org/physical-mental-health/mental-health/adult-mental-health/resilience-and-coping>
- Sherwood, K., & Liebling-Kalifani, H. (2012). A grounded theory investigation into the experiences of African women refugees: Effects on resilience and identity and implications for service provision. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(1), 86–108.
- Shishehgar, S., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M., Green, A., & Davidson, P. M. (2017). Health and socio-cultural experiences of refugee women: An integrative review. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 19, 959–973. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0379-1>
- Simich, L., Beiser, M., Stewart, M., & Mwakarimba, E. (2005). Providing social support for immigrants and refugees in Canada: Challenges and directions. *Journal of Immigrant Health*, 7(4), 259–268. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-005-5123-1>
- Simmel, G. (1955). *Conflict & the web of group-affiliations*. K. Wolff & R. Bendix (Trans.). The Free Press. (Original work published 1908).
- Sisto, A., Vicinanza, F., Campanozzi, L. L., Ricci, G., Tartaglini, D., & Tambone, V. (2019). Towards a transversal definition of psychological resilience: A literature review. *Medicina (Kaunas, Lithuania)*, 55(11), 745. <https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina55110745>
- Stainton, A., Chisholm, K., Kaiser, N., Rosen, M., Upthegrove, R., Ruhrmann, S., & Wood, S. J. (2019). Resilience as a multimodal dynamic process. *Early Intervention in Psychiatry*, 13(4), 725–732. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eip.12726>
- Stewart, M., Anderson, J., Beiser, M., Mwakarimba, E., Neufeld, A., Simich, L., & Spitzer, D. (2008). Multicultural meanings of social support among immigrants and refugees. *International Migration*, 46(3), 123–159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2008.00464.x>
- Turner, V. (1992). *Blazing the trail: Way marks in the exploration of symbols*. University of Arizona Press.
- Tushabe, T., & Muhonja, B. (2015). Mothers' decision making power: A new vision for working with internally displaced persons in Uganda and Kenya. In T. Takseva, & S. Sgoutas (Eds.), *Mothers under fire: Mothering in conflict areas*. (pp. 248–266). Demeter Press.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2023). *Women*. UNHCR USA. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/women.html>
- Vaill, P. (1989). *Managing as a performing art: New ideas for a world of chaotic change*. Jossey-Bass.
- Veronese, G., Cavazzoni, F., Russo, S., & Sousa, C. (2021). Risk and protective factors among Palestinian women living in a context of prolonged armed conflict and political oppression. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(19–20), 9299–9327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519865960>
- Voegelin, E. (1990). Reason: The classic experience. In E. Sandoz (Ed.), *The collected works of Eric Voegelin: Published essays 1966–1985*. (pp. 265–291). State University Press. (Original work published 1974).
- Williams, L., & Labonte, R. (2007). Empowerment for migrant communities: Paradoxes for practitioners. *Critical Public Health*, 17(4), 365–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581590701598425>
- World Bank (2022, September 30). *Fragility, conflict, and violence*. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>

Whitney McIntyre Miller is an Associate Professor of Leadership Studies at Chapman University who centers her scholarship on peace leadership and community development and leadership, publishing broadly in each. She has experience in community and international development, refugee resettlement, nonviolence, and elections monitoring. She is the Co-Director of the Chapman University Panther Experiential Philanthropy Project. She has served as the co-convenor of the International Leadership Association's Peace Leadership Affinity Group and as a Community Development Society board member. Communications can be directed to wmcintyr@chapman.edu.

Rabab Atwi is a Ph.D. student at Chapman University where she is specializing in cultural and curricular studies. She has experience as an administrator and English language teacher in international schools. She is also graduate research assistant working with faculty members on a variety of projects including COVID-19 and sustainability, the role of leadership in establishing peace, and the crucial role that parental involvement plays in education. Email atwi@chapman.edu.