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Invisible and Indispensable: Intergenerational Integration Experiences of Young Karen Refugee Women in Canada

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Abstract

This paper examines the settlement experiences of young Karen refugee women in Canada and their contributions to family and community integration. Drawing on my PhD dissertation project, which focuses on intergenerational Karen refugee women from Myanmar resettled in London, Ontario, beginning in 2006 after prolonged displacement along the Thailand–Myanmar border. Guided by intersectionality, the study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted in summer 2024 with eleven first-generation Karen refugee women. The analysis centres on five young women who arrived in Canada between the ages of eleven and sixteen, some of whom were born in refugee camps. Findings show that young Karen refugee women perform indispensable yet often unrecognized emotional, linguistic, and caregiving labour that sustains intergenerational integration. By foregrounding these contributions, the paper addresses a gap in forced migration scholarship on the emotional and relational dimensions of integration. It highlights the need for closer collaboration among researchers, community youth leaders, and settlement agencies to better support young women in protracted refugee situations.

Keywords: Karen refugee women, youth integration, intersectionality, gendered agency, emotional belonging

1. Introduction

Refugee youth resettlement is often framed through narratives of vulnerability, dependency, and adjustment, obscuring the forms of agency that young refugees—particularly young women—exercise in sustaining family adaptation. In Canada, integration is commonly assessed through economic participation, language proficiency, and self-sufficiency, rendering the emotional, cultural, and intergenerational labour performed within families largely invisible. This paper foregrounds the experiences of young Karen refugee women from Myanmar who arrived in Canada as children or adolescents following prolonged displacement along the Thailand–Myanmar border. Their narratives demonstrate that integration is not an individual achievement, but an intergenerational and gendered process sustained through caregiving, translation, and cultural continuity—forms of labour essential to family and community integration yet rarely acknowledged in settlement discourse.

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Dominant integration frameworks, including Ager and Strang's ten-domain model, emphasize structural indicators such as employment, housing, and education, often at the expense of lived and relational experiences (Ager & Strang, 2008). Relational approaches have expanded this focus by conceptualizing integration as inclusion and participation shaped through mutual adaptation, social bonds, and care (Hynie, 2018). However, even these perspectives rarely address the gendered and intergenerational dimensions of refugee youth experiences, particularly the emotional and caregiving labour performed by young women, which remains undervalued within policy and service frameworks.

Recent Canadian research increasingly recognizes refugee youth as active social actors who translate, mediate, and advocate for their families across settlement institutions. However, gender remains marginalized in this literature, and insufficient attention is paid to how cultural expectations, family responsibilities, and age intersect to shape young women's agency (Shields & Lujan, 2018; Hynie, Guruge, & Shakya, 2019). For many young refugee women, integration involves not only adapting to a new society but also sustaining moral, cultural, and relational obligations across generations—I conceptualize this as *gendered relational integration*.

To analyze these dynamics, my study draws on intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Intersectionality illuminates how race, gender, class, and migration history intersect to produce both constraints and possibilities in the lives of displaced women (Crenshaw, 1991). Collins's matrix of domination further demonstrates how power operates across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains, enabling marginalized actors to exercise agency within constraint (Collins, 2000). Together, these frameworks make visible the hidden labour through which young Karen refugee women navigate family obligations, cultural expectations, and institutional barriers.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, feminist, and interpretive approach based on semi-structured interviews with five young Karen refugee women who arrived in Canada between the ages of seven and sixteen. Thematic analysis identifies five interrelated patterns shaping their settlement trajectories: role reversal and parentification; language and emotional labour; negotiation of gender and generational expectations; cultural transmission as agency; and faith and community as sources of resilience.

This paper asks: To what extent do young Karen refugee women contribute to the integration process in Canada, and how do they navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their families? I argue that young Karen refugee women are invisible yet indispensable contributors to integration. Through caregiving, translation, and cultural mediation, they sustain collective adaptation and redefine integration as a relational, intergenerational process rooted in care, moral responsibility, and resilience. In doing so, the study challenges adult-centred and assimilationist models of settlement and advances an intersectional feminist reconceptualization of integration as collective, affective, and ongoing.

2. Literature Review: Youth Agency and Gendered Resilience in Refugee Integration

Refugee integration is widely understood as a multidimensional and evolving process that extends beyond economic participation or linguistic proficiency. Ager and Strang define integration as "the achievement and maintenance of a condition within which individuals can achieve their full potential in the society of settlement" (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 169), and their ten-domain framework—covering employment, education, housing, social bonds, and rights—remains foundational in integration studies. However, its application has often privileged structural and institutional indicators over refugees' lived and affective experiences. Hynie critiques this emphasis, arguing that integration must be understood as "inclusion and participation" within social and policy environments that either enable or hinder belonging (Hynie, 2018, p. 266). She further emphasizes that integration is shaped by both refugees' actions and host societies' responses, framing it as a reciprocal rather than one-sided process (Hynie, 2018, p. 272). Despite this relational turn, Canadian scholarship has been slow to apply such approaches to refugee youth, particularly young women whose agency and caregiving roles remain underrecognized.

Recent Canadian studies move beyond assimilationist models to conceptualize integration as a process of resilience and identity negotiation. Research on refugee and immigrant youth in Montreal shows that young people often understand resilience as the ability to engage with a new society while remaining anchored in cultural heritage and past experiences (Gyan et al., 2018, p. 5). In this view, belonging is not only structural but relational, produced through social connections that sustain both adaptation and continuity.

These findings challenge deficit-based narratives that frame refugee and immigrant youth primarily as recipients of adjustment support or as successful subjects of assimilation rather than as active contributors to family and community integration (Shields & Lujan, 2018, p. 9; Kalchos, Kassan, & Ford, 2015, p. 308). Nevertheless, limited attention has been paid to how resilience operates along gendered and intergenerational lines, particularly in relation to young refugee women's family roles and responsibilities (Hynie et al., 2019; Kalchos et al., 2015).

Earlier research on the integration of refugee and immigrant youth broadly conceptualized young people through frameworks of adjustment, acculturation, and support needs, particularly within school and settlement systems (Kalchos et al., 2015). Within these models, youth contributions to family settlement were often overlooked or treated as obstacles to educational success. Shields and Lujan demonstrate, however, that immigrant and refugee youth frequently assume adult responsibilities—including translation, service navigation, and caregiving—roles that have been framed as burdens rather than as forms of agency and contribution (Shields & Lujan, 2018, p. 9). Together, these studies illustrate how earlier integration research foregrounded youth vulnerability while obscuring the relational labour through which young people mediate between home and host societies.

Empirical studies further underscore the intergenerational dimensions of youth agency. Hynie et al. describe refugee youth—particularly Karen adolescents—as "resettlement champions" who balance educational trajectories with responsibilities such as translation and caregiving (Hynie, Guruge, & Shakya, 2019, p.14). While their study identifies these dynamics, it does not thoroughly examine the emotional and cultural dimensions of this labour or the ways gender shapes these responsibilities. Similarly, Yohani highlights how refugee children and youth act as cultural mediators by interpreting language, norms, and institutional expectations for caregivers, often assuming responsibilities beyond age-appropriate roles, thereby shaping identity, emotional labour, and family relationships (Yohani, 2010). Collectively, this literature conceptualizes integration as a relational process but does not sufficiently examine how relationality is shaped by gender.

Gender remains underexplored in refugee youth integration research despite evidence of its significance. For instance, *The Immigrant Youth in Canada* report notes that immigrant and refugee youth navigate cultural expectations that shape access to education, health services, and institutional support, often relying on family and community networks when mainstream services are inaccessible or culturally misaligned (Shields & Lujan, 2018, p. 12). Kalchos et al. further observe that school environments can reproduce systemic marginalization through discrimination, cultural misunderstanding, and the underutilization of psychosocial support (Kalchos, Kassan, & Ford, 2015). Feminist migration scholarship highlights how gendered divisions of care and emotional labour structure integration processes (Hynie, 2014), yet these insights are rarely applied to youth who simultaneously act as daughters, interpreters, and caregivers (Hynie, Guruge, & Shakya, 2019; Gyan et al., 2018).

Although resilience is central to youth integration research, it remains insufficiently theorized beyond individual coping. Gyan et al. (2018) show that refugee and immigrant youth understand resilience as navigating exclusion while reconstructing identity and maintaining cultural connections. At the same time, it has been documented that strong educational and health outcomes are associated with persistent stress, mental health challenges, and barriers to accessing settlement services (Shields & Lujan, 2019). Taken together, these analyses emphasize resilience as an outcome or personal capacity but rarely examine how such pressures are managed relationally within families, particularly through the emotional and caregiving labour performed by young women.

Hynie's broader relational framework—conceptualizing integration as mutual adaptation between newcomers and host societies—offers a lens for addressing these omissions (Hynie, 2024). Applied to youth, this framework highlights the bidirectional labour that young refugees perform as they interpret institutions for parents and translate familial expectations into new social contexts. This negotiation is particularly gendered among young women, who serve as both protectors of tradition and navigators of change. However, dominant integration frameworks continue to privilege economic participation and access to services over the relational and affective dimensions of settlement.

In summary, the literature offers valuable insights into refugee youth agency but remains limited in its theorization of affective, cultural, and gendered dimensions of integration. Few studies adopt an intersectional feminist lens to examine how power operates across age, ethnicity, and gender, and research on Karen refugee communities in Canada has primarily focused on adult resettlement, mental health, or collective identity reconstruction (Clark, 2014; Marchbank, Letourneau, & Cummings, 2014; Erdogan, 2012).

By centering the narratives of young Karen women in London, Ontario, this study addresses these gaps by reconceptualizing integration as intergenerational negotiation embedded in care and cultural continuity, reframing resilience as a collective and gendered practice, and foregrounding young refugee women's emotional and relational labour as a central—rather than peripheral—dimension of integration.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) matrix of domination to examine how interlocking systems of power shape the integration experiences of young Karen refugee women in Canada. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality critiques single-axis analyses that isolate gender or race, arguing that "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference… but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). Intersectionality highlights how overlapping social categories—such as race, gender, and legal status—compound vulnerability for women of colour and displaced persons. In forced migration contexts, it exposes how refugee policies, institutional structures, and patriarchal norms intersect to produce forms of structural invisibility that cannot be understood through a single axis of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244).

Building on Crenshaw, Collins extends intersectionality into a broader theory of power through the matrix of domination, which conceptualizes oppression as operating across four interrelated domains that simultaneously produce constraint and possibility. She emphasizes that systems of race, class, gender, and nation "mutually construct one another," rather than operate additively (Collins, 2000, p. 21). These domains include: structural power, expressed through large-scale institutions such as legal systems, labour markets, education, and housing that reproduce racialized and gendered subordination; disciplinary power, exercised through bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance mechanisms that regulate behaviour within schools, hospitals, and workplaces, often in invisible ways; hegemonic power, embedded in ideology, language, and culture that normalize and legitimize inequality; and interpersonal power, enacted and resisted through everyday social interactions at the micro level (Collins, 2000, pp. 295–307).

Collins underscores the interdependence of these four domains, noting that institutional exclusion may be reinforced through bureaucratic practices, cultural stereotypes, and everyday interactions. At the same time, she highlights their potential as sites of agency, where women can act as "rule breakers and rule benders," disrupting institutional norms through strategic negotiation or everyday resistance (Collins, 2000, p. 295). This framing foregrounds the dialectical nature of power: the same systems that enforce marginalization can also be reappropriated as spaces of empowerment. Within this framework, oppression is both structural and embodied, while agency emerges through lived, relational, and community-based practices. Collins's emphasis on situated knowledge and the "outsider-within" standpoint (Collins, 2000, p. 14) illuminates how marginalized women and girls generate new "angles of vision" on power and social transformation (Collins, 2000, p. 27). For refugee girls—whose contributions are often devalued in integration discourse—this perspective foregrounds lived experience as a critical source of knowledge and critique.

Both Crenshaw and Collins caution against reducing intersectionality to a checklist of identities, instead calling for analyses attentive to relational power and cultural specificity. Collins notes that Western frameworks often define empowerment in terms of individual autonomy, overlooking culturally embedded forms of agency such as caregiving, faith, and kinship-based solidarity (Collins, 2000). In refugee integration research, this tendency obscures how racialized women and girls enact resistance through everyday practices of care and community reproduction. Hynie similarly observes that dominant integration models privilege economic participation and formal benchmarks over embodied and relational practices that sustain family and belonging (Hynie, 2018).

In this study, intersectionality functions as both an analytic and a methodological framework, mapping how settlement institutions, racialization, and gendered care work interact to shape the settlement trajectories of young Karen women. The matrix of domination further illuminates how these women navigate power across multiple domains: negotiating institutions (structural and disciplinary), resisting stereotypes (hegemonic), and sustaining intergenerational resilience through family and community relationships (interpersonal). Together, these frameworks reconceptualize integration not as a linear path toward adaptation, but as an ongoing, relational negotiation of belonging, care, and resistance.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in feminist and intersectional frameworks to explore the settlement experiences of young Karen refugee women in London, Ontario. It forms part of a larger doctoral dissertation examining the intergenerational settlement trajectories of Karen refugee women resettled in Canada beginning in 2006, following prolonged displacement along the Thailand–Myanmar border. By centering young women's voices, the study seeks to illuminate the emotional and relational dimensions of integration that are often overlooked in mainstream settlement research. Intersectionality theory, as articulated by Crenshaw and Collins, provides a critical lens for understanding how gender, age, refugee status, class, and cultural identity intersect to shape young women's settlement experiences. This feminist qualitative approach foregrounds participants' lived experiences while emphasizing reflexivity, ethical engagement, and attentiveness to power relations throughout the research process (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

Eleven first-generation Karen refugee women participated in this study: six older women who arrived in Canada as adult mothers and five younger women who arrived as children or adolescents between the ages of eleven and sixteen. Some of the younger participants were born in refugee camps in Thailand and later resettled in London, Ontario, through Canada's Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR) program. Participants were recruited through community networks via purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across generations. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that enabled participants to narrate their migration and settlement experiences in their own words. Interviews were conducted in English or Karen, depending on participants' preferences, with support from a bilingual Karen interpreter as needed to ensure linguistic and cultural accuracy. Interviews lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Guided by an intersectional analytic approach, the coding process examined how structural factors—such as gender norms, intergenerational expectations, and institutional barriers—intersected with participants' narratives. Analytic attention focused on themes of belonging, intergenerational responsibility, and agency within the resettlement process. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from York University's Research Ethics Board. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, identifying details were removed, and trauma-informed practices were employed to prioritize psychological safety and respect participants' emotional boundaries.

By foregrounding the experiences of young Karen refugee women, this methodology challenges deficit-oriented and adult-centric interpretations of refugee settlement.

5. Findings

Participants who arrived as adolescents/children

Names (pseudonym)	Age when they arrived in Canada
Sai Roong	11 (born in a refugee camp)
Grace	15
Wah	16
Bee	13
Daymu	7 (born in a refugee camp)

This section draws on the narratives of five younger Karen refugee women—Sai Roong, Grace, Wah, Bee, and Daymu—who arrived in London, Ontario, between the ages of seven and sixteen. Sai Roong and Daymu were born in refugee camps and spent their entire childhoods there before resettling in Canada. Interview findings reveal that early migration profoundly shaped their integration pathways and sense of belonging. Their stories illuminate five interrelated themes: (i) role reversal and parentification, (ii) language and emotional labour, (iv) negotiating gender and generational expectations, (4) cultural transmission as agency, and (v) faith and community as sources of resilience.

5.1. Role Reversal and Parentification

A central pattern across all interviews was the rapid reversal of generational roles following resettlement. The young Karen women—arriving as adolescents—assumed adult-like duties almost immediately, guiding their parents through complex bureaucratic and institutional systems.

Sai Roong captured this reversal vividly:
"As soon as we arrived in Canada, my parents relied on me, and the roles reversed very quickly… I became the parent and caregiver… I even attended my younger sister's parent-teacher meetings while still in high school" (Sai Roong).

Similarly, Grace explained:
"My parents did not really know the language until now, so they rely on me as a translator, including insurance stuff and banking. The biggest issue was banking because they wanted to invest some money for saving, and terminology like banking stuff I didn't know very well as a kid" (Grace).

This role reversal can be understood as a form of parentification—simultaneously burdensome and empowering. As Daymu recalled:
"Moving to Canada was a significant shift… I became the caregiver and had to look after my family, including my younger siblings" (Daymu).
These young women navigated adult responsibilities while managing adolescent identities, illustrating how early forced migration disrupts traditional family hierarchies. As findings from the larger cohort confirm, this redistribution of responsibility represents a continuity of caregiving as a cultural legacy—transferred across generations but reconfigured within Canadian institutional contexts.

5.2. Language and Emotional Labour

Language acquisition functioned as both a pathway to empowerment and a source of emotional exhaustion. Acting as interpreters for parents and elders, the young women carried significant emotional labour. Wah reflected:
"When I brought my parents to the clinic as an interpreter, it was challenging in a new place. I spoke English a little, but not fluently. I took three years to be able to speak English fluently" (Wah).
The younger participants' experiences align with broader findings that resettlement reshapes family hierarchies by placing linguistic authority in children's hands. They frequently translated official forms, school correspondence, and medical information, thereby bridging cultural and institutional gaps.
Grace's story illustrates the dual burden of learning while teaching:
"I tried to explain terms that I did not know either" (Grace).
While these responsibilities generated anxiety and fatigue, they also fostered confidence and maturity. Through linguistic mediation, the young women became emotional anchors within their families, transforming a structural barrier into a relational resource.

5.3. Negotiating Gender and Generational Expectations

As they matured, participants navigated tensions between Karen cultural norms and Canadian gender expectations. Their accounts demonstrate how gender roles were both internalized and reinterpreted, producing hybrid understandings of equality. Grace noted:
"My parents expected me to study well, and when I have spare time, they expect me to go to the library and read. My role is to study well, do well in school, and be a good kid" (Grace).
Bee articulated a relational view of equality:
"I think gender equality goes beyond a simple 50–50 split. For me, it requires more to ensure a successful relationship, because there will be days when I am sick and need more help, and days when my husband is sick and needs more help" (Bee).
Sai Roong reflected on enduring cultural double standards:
"I am expected not to stay out very late without him [my spouse]. I understand his concerns for my safety, but at the same time it's still a conflict in my mind, because I think outside can be safe or unsafe for both genders" (Sai Roong).
These reflections reveal a generational consciousness shaped by bicultural experience, where traditional Karen norms are neither wholly rejected nor uncritically accepted. Rather, the young women reinterpret these norms through lived experience in Canada, embodying what Collins describes as agency within the matrix of domination, where marginalized actors generate alternative meanings within structural constraints (284).

5.4. Cultural Transmission as Agency

As mothers or mentors, the young women actively engaged in preserving Karen culture as a deliberate form of agency. Wah emphasized:
"I teach my kids to respect elders and remember where they come from. We go to Karen school every week" (Wah).
Bee echoed:
"My kids were born here, but that doesn't mean they don't need to know their roots. I teach them language, culture, and where mommy came from" (Bee).
Sai Roong reflected:
"Keeping our Karen cultural values is very important to me. My children need to know their roots, history, and background. Even though we are in a third country, I often share stories with my children about Karen, including watching videos online. I want to make sure they have the privilege to be born here, but it doesn't mean they don't have to work hard" (Sai Roong).
Cultural teaching thus emerged as both emotional labour and political agency—a means of resisting assimilation while cultivating belonging**.** This relational orientation parallels Hynie's relational integration model, in which belonging is sustained through networks of care and interdependence rather than individual achievement alone (328–30).

5.5. Faith and Community as Resilience

Faith emerged as a sustaining force during periods of isolation, financial pressure, and cultural negotiation. Grace reflected:
"We are Christians, so most of the time when we face challenges, we pray to God and read the Bible. There are people in the community who help us pray. That gives us strength and less stress" (Grace).
Wah similarly noted:
"My faith in Jesus—that's how I turn challenges into opportunities" (Wah).
Sai Roong described the connection between faith and belonging:
"Faith has been a huge part of my life, and it has helped me cope with challenges. That is how I was raised, and it's something I will teach my children. To me, successful settlement is feeling at home. I think I did it because I feel this is my home… Canada is my safe zone" (Sai Roong).

These testimonies demonstrate that spirituality is inseparable from emotional well-being and social integration. Through prayer groups, church networks, and community volunteerism, young Karen women transformed faith into a collective resource that bridged generational and cultural divides.

Overall, the experiences of these young Karen refugee women reveal that settlement is not a linear process of adaptation, but an intergenerational negotiation shaped by caregiving, faith, and cultural legacy. Early age at migration positioned them simultaneously as dependents and decision-makers, mediating between family expectations and institutional demands. Their stories confirm that integration unfolds relationally—through translation, caregiving, cultural transmission, and spiritual belonging. These young women redefine settlement not as assimilation or individual independence, but as the maintenance of reciprocal ties within families, communities, and across generations. In doing so, they embody intersectional forms of agency grounded in care, relationality, and resilience.

6. Discussion

This study examined how young Karen refugee women contribute to integration in Canada and how they navigate resettlement challenges on behalf of their parents and other family members. The findings demonstrate that these young women are not passive recipients of settlement support but *invisible yet indispensable integration workers* whose linguistic, emotional, and cultural labour sustains the everyday functioning of refugee households. Their narratives position integration not as an individual economic outcome but as a *relational, gendered, and intergenerational practice* rooted in care, mediation, and belonging.

6.1 Young Women as Unacknowledged Integration Agents

Participants' experiences of role reversal and parentification reveal what this study conceptualizes as *intergenerational integration brokerage*: the unpaid and unrecognized work through which young refugee women mediate between families and settlement institutions. Acting as interpreters, cultural brokers, and advocates, they translated not only language but also bureaucratic expectations, institutional norms, and social values.

This finding aligns with Shields and Lujan's observation that refugee youth often function as unacknowledged settlement agents whose contributions remain largely invisible within institutional frameworks (Shield & Lujan, 2018). However, this study extends that insight by showing that such agency is profoundly gendered and sustained over time rather than episodic.

By assuming adult responsibilities while still in school, these young women filled critical gaps left by formal settlement services—navigating schools, healthcare systems, financial institutions, and government paperwork on behalf of their parents. Their early institutional fluency thus transformed what might otherwise have been a structural disadvantage into an intergenerational resource, enabling family integration to proceed despite systemic barriers.

From an intersectional perspective, this form of agency emerges at the intersection of age, gender, displacement, and linguistic capital. As Crenshaw (1991) reminds us, overlapping social positions produce both constraint and possibility. For young Karen women, youth and bilingualism conferred practical authority, while gendered expectations simultaneously intensified caregiving responsibilities. This dual positioning—as both dependents and caregivers—renders them pivotal but often unrecognized architects of family integration.

6.2 Gendered Care and Cultural Continuity as Integration Work

Participants' everyday practices of caregiving and cultural transmission further challenge assimilationist models of integration. Rather than abandoning Karen values, they actively reworked them within Canadian contexts. Through child-rearing, community involvement, and language instruction, cultural preservation became a form of *care-based agency*. This reflects Collins's notion of resistance within the matrix of domination; wherein marginalized actors generate alternative epistemologies from within systems of constraint (*Collins, 2000)*).

Teaching children Karen language, respect for elders, and Christian faith functioned as what this study terms *relational integration labour*: practices that sustain belonging across generations while negotiating life in a new society. Integration, in this sense, is not cultural loss but cultural reconfiguration across space and time. Hynie (2024)'s relational model of integration is clearly reflected here: belonging is sustained through care networks, intergenerational reciprocity, and collective identity rather than through individual achievement alone. This feminized, unpaid labour constitutes a hidden infrastructure of integration that supports both emotional well-being and cultural continuity within refugee families.

6.3 Negotiating Gender, Generational Expectations, and Belonging

The findings also reveal how young Karen women actively negotiate gender and generational expectations in Canada. While maintaining familial respect and moral responsibility, participants simultaneously challenged gendered inequalities through educational aspirations, career planning, and expectations of partnership. Their articulation of equality as mutual care rather than a rigid "50–50" division of labour signals the emergence of hybrid gender ethics grounded in both Karen cultural values and Canadian social norms.

These negotiations reflect what this study conceptualizes as *situated feminist agency*: a form of agency exercised through relational decision-making rather than overt resistance. Participants' ability to occupy multiple roles—students, caregivers, mothers, translators—positions them as emerging cultural and moral leaders within the Karen diaspora. Yet this labour also carries emotional costs and remains invisible mainly within policy frameworks that prioritize adult employment or language acquisition as indicators of "successful" integration.

6.4 Faith and Community as Emotional Infrastructure

Faith and community networks emerged as critical emotional infrastructures that mitigated isolation, stress, and uncertainty. Church participation offered spiritual grounding alongside access to social capital, collective care, and practical support. For many participants, Christianity was inseparable from their sense of safety, home, and belonging in Canada. Through prayer groups, volunteerism, and shared worship, young Karen women cultivated resilience in the absence of extended kin networks or adequate institutional support. This finding reinforces Hynie (2024)'s argument that integration must be understood as an affective process encompassing emotional security and belonging, not solely structural participation.

6.5 Reframing Integration through Intersectionality

Applying intersectionality and the matrix of domination reveals that young Karen women's integration experiences cannot be reduced to either individual adaptation or structural incorporation. Instead, integration emerges as a collective, moral, and emotional process produced through gendered relational labour. Within intersecting systems of power—settlement institutions, cultural norms, and intergenerational expectations—young women generate alternative forms of agency that transform care into social action.

Collectively, these findings call for a redefinition of integration success: one that recognizes emotional labour, caregiving, cultural continuity, and intergenerational mediation as central rather than peripheral to settlement processes. By centering the experiences of young Karen refugee women, this study challenges adult-centric and economistic models of integration. It foregrounds the invisible yet indispensable work through which refugee families create belonging in Canada.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that young Karen refugee women are invisible yet indispensable contributors to the integration of refugee families in Canada. Far from passive dependents, they function as interpreters, caregivers, cultural mediators, and moral anchors whose labour sustains the everyday work of resettlement. Their experiences reveal that integration is not an individual process of adaptation measured solely through employment or language acquisition, but a collective, intergenerational practice grounded in gendered care, cultural continuity, and relational belonging. Through translation, caregiving, and ethical responsibility to family and community, these young women redefine "successful settlement" as collective stability and emotional security rather than individual self-sufficiency.

From an intersectional perspective, their dual positionality—as both dependents and decision-makers—illustrates how agency emerges within and against structures of power. As Patricia Hill Collins describes, these young women enact "agency within constraint" by transforming institutional marginalization into intergenerational strength. Their caregiving and cultural labour, though largely absent from policy and service frameworks, constitute the emotional and social infrastructure of integration, sustaining family cohesion and community resilience in resettlement contexts.

Building on earlier research on Karen refugees in London, Ontario, which highlights the importance of identity formation and belonging in shaping resettlement outcomes (Erdogan, 2012), this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that identity and belonging are not merely psychological states, but relational and gendered practices enacted through everyday labour. Integration, in this sense, is lived through care, mediation, and cultural transmission across generations.

Five interrelated insights emerge from the findings. First, young Karen women serve as intergenerational mediators, bridging families and institutions through linguistic and bureaucratic navigation. Second, their gendered emotional and caregiving labour forms an invisible infrastructure that sustains both settlement and cultural continuity. Third, they actively negotiate gender and cultural norms, producing hybrid forms of womanhood rooted in both Karen values and Canadian social contexts. Fourth, faith and community networks operate as emotional and social infrastructures of resilience. Finally, these practices collectively redefine success in integration as the well-being and stability of families and communities rather than individual advancement alone.

While this study offers in-depth qualitative insight, it is limited by its small, localized sample and its focus on young female participants, some of whom identify as Christian, including Catholic and other Christian traditions. Religious affiliation shaped participants' coping strategies and community engagement, but this study does not undertake a comparative analysis of denominational differences. The findings are not statistically generalizable and reflect retrospective interpretations rather than longitudinal change. Future research should extend this work through comparative, intergenerational, and longitudinal designs that include diverse gender and sexual identities and examine how religious and spiritual differences may further shape refugee integration experiences.

The findings carry important implications for policy and practice. Settlement systems must recognize refugee youth—especially young women—as active contributors rather than passive recipients of services. Family- and gender-responsive programming is needed to move beyond adult-centred and individualistic integration models. Faith-based and community organizations should be engaged as partners in settlement, given their central role in fostering resilience and belonging. Schools and community institutions must also develop flexible, culturally informed support that acknowledges young refugee women's dual roles as learners and family mediators.

At its core, this study foregrounds the unseen labour of young refugee women in sustaining integration. Their translation, caregiving, and cultural transmission are not peripheral to settlement—they constitute it. Recognizing their contributions reframes integration as an ethics of relational care, in which belonging is continuously produced through interdependence, memory, and intergenerational responsibility. These young Karen women remind us that integration is not about leaving the past behind, but about carrying it forward—through care, culture, and collective resilience.

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