



# Middle Eastern Refugee Women: A Pathway to Violence Prevention

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Family Services of Peel - Peel Institute on Violence Prevention

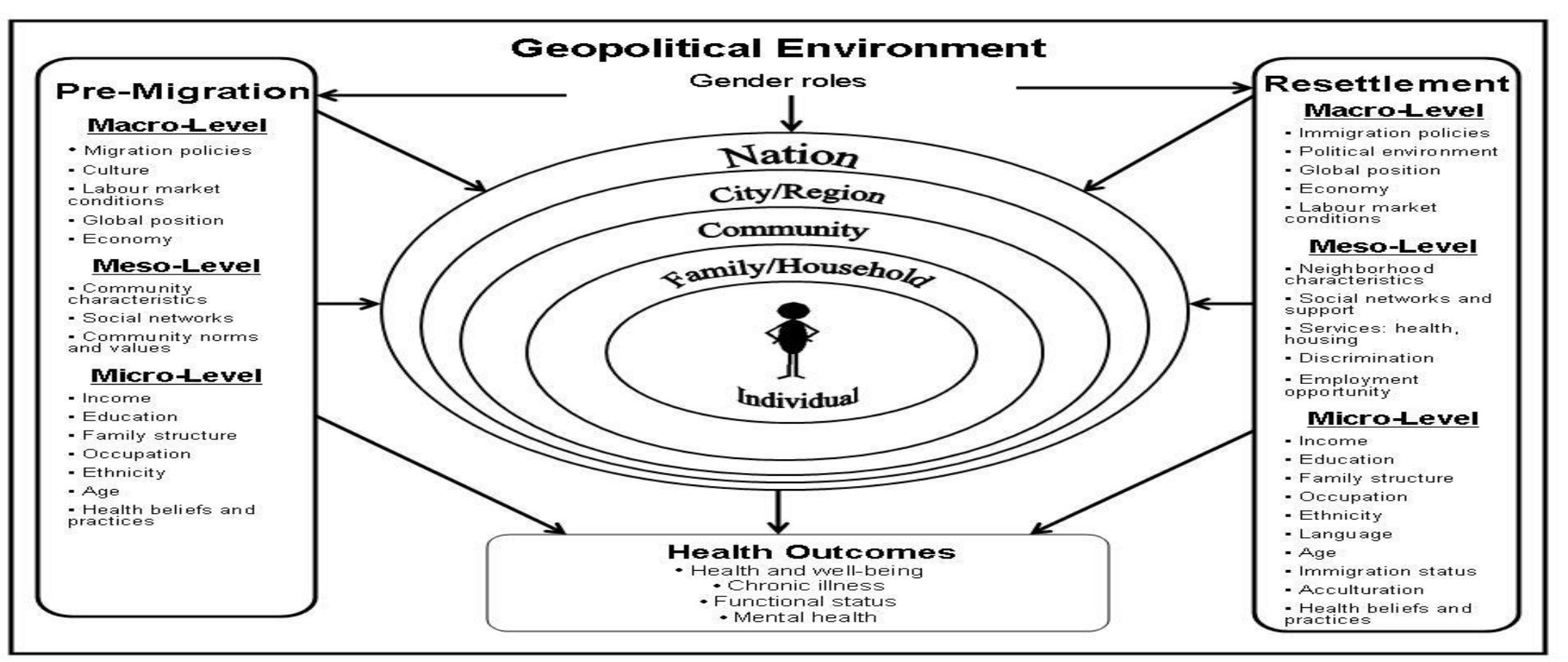
# Region of Peel Statistics

- ▶ In 2014, of the 260,404 new Canadians welcomed into Canada, 23,286 were refugees and of those refugees, 11,400 settled in Ontario.
- ▶ According to the 2011 National Household Survey, Mississauga is third in terms of recent immigrants with a Syrian place of birth: Montreal 915 □ Toronto 540 □ Mississauga 415
- ▶ It was confirmed through COSTI Immigrant Services in Toronto, that 1,845 Syrian GARs were temporarily housed in Toronto between Nov. 4th and March 1st. Of that 1,845 refugees, 40% have settled in Peel as of April 2016.
- ▶ Peel has now welcomed, through secondary migration, the following Syrian GARs:
  - ▶ □ **153 Families** □ **277 Adult** □ **455 Children**
  - ▶ □ 732 Persons Municipality breakdown:
    - ▶ □ **Mississauga total persons 708** □ **Brampton total persons 24** □ **Caledon total 0**
- ▶ Through Peel District School Board it was confirmed that since Jan.4th it has registered 425 Syrian students as of mid-April 2016

# Project Methodology

Goal	Objective	Activities	Timeline	Partners
<b>Learn how the trajectory of immigration shapes the refugee women's status and impacts their overall safety and well-being</b>	To support empower refugee women by providing an opportunity for their voices to be heard and to have an input on what impacts their safety throughout their migration journey.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish an advisory group</li> <li>2. Establish a project implementation team</li> <li>3. Literature review, and work plan</li> <li>4. Outreach and promotion, share flyers through partners</li> <li>5. Conducting the three (3) Reflection and Action Group Discussions</li> </ol>	<p>August 2017</p> <p>August – Sept 2017</p> <p>Sept – January 2017</p> <p>Nov 17 – March 2018</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Newcomer Centre of Peel</li> <li>2. Polycultural Immigrant and community Services</li> <li>3. Catholic Cross-Cultural Services</li> </ol>
<b>Inform government policies and practices about the underling factors that influence the refugee women's safety in Canada.</b>	Direct some attention towards further approaches that examines the unique experience of migration from the refugee women's perspectives and its intersectionality with their well-being	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Document the outcomes from the discussions and review with the advisory group</li> <li>2. Present finding in a Regional Symposium</li> <li>3. Project evaluation and reporting to CWF</li> </ol>	<p>January – April 18</p> <p>May 2018</p> <p>June - July 2018</p>	

# Gender, Migration and Health: A Conceptual Framework



Biermann: 2006

Central concentric circles adapted from Hertzman (2001)



# Focus Groups - Preliminary Findings

## What It Means To Be A Refugee?

***“Seeking refuge isn’t just about leaving my country... it also is about feeling like a refugee in my own country. And I am sure that you all have experienced internal displacement, where I would have to leave my own city to find a safer city within my own country”***

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# Voices of Refugee Women

- *So, we left Sahnaya and we left our house in Sahnaya and we came back to Daraa. In Daraa there is Daraa the city and there is [listing different neighborhoods] etc. etc.... so we stayed in Al-Dahiya [in ref. to a specific neighborhood in Daraa] ... we lived in Al-Dahiya for 6 months, we were living in Tafas [in ref. to a specific neighborhood in Daraa she used to live in] previously... Actually, we left Tafas because in the same day we decided to move, my husband's aunt's home was bombed... in that same day 8 people were killed... a woman and her three children and her daughter in law and her three children... in the same day they were all dead when they were fasting [in ref. to Ramadan].*

# LIFE IN SYRIA

- ▶ *“Our marriages in Syria are traditional as you know... mostly arranged. Very little people marry after falling in love and having a love relationship. So, marriage is usually a social construct in our society : for example, if he is angry and he verbally assaults her, they [in ref. to society/people] would tell her to be patient and it’s not right of her to blame him... maybe he came home angry from work pressures.”*
- ▶ *“Yes, you can... you can definitely divorce your husband in a Syrian court but you don’t get anything out of it... no financial support for you or your kids.”*
- ▶ *“You must always sacrifice your rights when you’re an Arab woman.”*

# LIFE IN SYRIA

- ▶ *"I am not talking about myself.... really. I am talking about our society, if she heard verbal abuse from her husband she is expected to suffer silently... for example if her husband came home and he just started swearing at her, she cannot say anything"*
- ▶ *"I think this boils down to the understanding of the concept of "Aib" [in ref. to the Arabic word that means not desired societally/social taboo]. Everything a woman does or a woman should not do is because of this concept.*
- ▶ *In general, the woman in an Arabic society is already viewed as the weakest link or the weakest member. Just by leaving her hometown and because she is the weakest link, they [in ref. to people/men] try to exploit her and take advantage of her. Despite that she's a woman, she's actually the foundation of society, she's the mother who raises children, she's the patient link that looks after her husband or takes his place if he were dead or imprisoned.*



# Life in Syria

- There is nothing
- No services... no Institutes
- What institutes?
- it's not just in Syria
- This is everywhere in the Arab countries
- You are not entitled to anything... unless you can divorce your own husband
- ▶ In our countries, our rights and freedoms were not present because they were concealed under traditions and what's allowed and not in our Arab society. Here, we feel liberated because our rights are not concealed under these things.

# The Journey from Syria

- *“I went to Jordan. I honestly was happy in Jordan... like I did not go through a very bad experience. It is very true however that there is no access to education there, even teachers in schools would tell the children “If you want to study, study if you do not want to study do not study, sit down and be quiet. I will not teach you”. The problem was that these teachers were not willing to teach refugee kids... they would say “Oh you’re refugees and you came into our country and now you want us to teach you?”. So that was the problem.”*
- *“We were in Syria, in small town called Al Amood. My husband passed away, I have three girls and one son. The rest [in ref to her other children] are not with me, they got married and left [in ref to other countries]. My oldest son is in Russia. My daughters are beautiful just like this young lady here. I am always scared when they go to university, I always worry about when are they coming back home...”*



# The Journey

- ▶ The Jordanians...the Jordanian men... unless you're strong and will try to fend them off from you so they can leave you alone.
- ▶ So, it felt as if they wanted to exploit these women? So, it felt like they wanted to exploit women, excuse me for saying this, sexually and physically?
- ▶ just by leaving your country, your value decreased as a woman, you are viewed as a woman who may accept anything that comes her way.
- ▶ In Lebanon, speaking of, do you know how they threatened my daughter in law? My daughter in law was gorgeous. Just like a beauty queen... And they were threatening her in her home. Her daughter is 5 years old, her daughter told me:" Nana [grandma] someone came and he had a gun and he wanted to kill me and kill mama".

# The Journey

- ▶ *“My oldest son told me before he left “Mama either they end up taking me or they take my sisters” [they in ref. to the free Syrian Army] so he was threatened by them. He has a small daughter who is 8 months old at that time, who is disabled. At night we closed the doors to our house, and ran away to Turkey. In Turkey, we lived there for four years, but it was very difficult. My daughters got married in Turkey...”*
- ▶ *“Yes, for marriage. And then, my daughter who was recently engaged.... she received a pile of gold from her engagement. She was wearing all her gold while walking in the street one day... a man came suddenly and snatched all her gold... it was very difficult for us in Turkey...very difficult there... even when we closed our house doors at night we still were scared and I was scared for my daughters’ fate and sake.”*

# The Journey

- ▶ Yes. We are from Ain-Arab in Syria. I have a disabled daughter, so we left for her sake. So, we left Ain-Arab to Aleppo and then to Al Dahiya because of the constant shelling and missiles in Aleppo. We wanted to take my daughter to Turkey because we thought maybe Turkish doctors are good...So we left for Turkey. We stayed in Turkey for four years and nothing improved for my daughter. The surgery... her surgery was no good, her legs [in ref. to her daughter's paralysis] ... one is gone and one did not improve. We came to Canada for my daughter and... I do not know. We have been here for a year and we take her for treatment... I do not know... Allah knows... I also have other kids... five boys they died.
- ▶ I swear on Allah's name. She swore to me that they beat her... they used electrocuting rods and she still has injury marks all over her body... they knew she was a refugee from Syria. But she needed that Identification so that my son can smuggle her to the Netherlands from Turkey. When we were finally able to bring her from Turkey to that country to the Netherlands ... she arrived there with snow on the ground... they had no water and no food for 8 days...nothing at all, and they did not release her to see my son, they kept her detained. We thought they would release her to him, in a few more days but after 8 days they sent her back to Syria... not alone but she was with 300 other people. Now her husband just had to leave her...he cannot do anything for her...



# The Journey

- ▶ [voice breaking]: because my husband would not go himself, he does not have the courage to leave. He was ready to sacrifice me so he wouldn't have to leave Egypt. He told me "You go to Europe and you then apply for a permission for family reunion to bring us all there with you. But if you leave it up to me to leave and do this, I will not".



# Coming to Canada

- ▶ *“eh... yes Justin Trudeau...for helping alleviate the suffering of all of these Syrian refugees, from war and hardships... I would like to thank the Canadian government for everything they did for us. And I would like to extend thank you to you [ addressing the organizers] for this event.”*
- ▶ *“When I came to Canada, I too was very... I thank Allah for this... when I first came here they did an interview with me and I told them I thank Allah because here it is Safe... In Canada there is safety for everyone and my kids are safe... I thank Allah for that. We were happy at most because my kids were safe. But from the financial aspect, I felt like I was suffocating. We were in the hotel when we arrived in Canada and we felt like we were suffocating...from the time in the hotel... we stayed in the hotel you know for how long we stayed without food there? For 20 days without any food in that hotel...”*



# Coming to Canada

- ▶ yes absolutely... thank Allah we are happy and my kids are happy and we were good [in ref. to financial matters] ...but when we came here we faced a lot of difficulties and I just wish my other children came with us here [in ref. to Canada] because then my happiness would be completed. But my happiness will not be complete until all of my children are with me here.
- ▶ Of course, here a woman has rights and she has freedom like men... there are laws and rules that protect her from everything... we don't have that in our countries...





# Coming to Canada

- ▶ *“So, my son passed his baccalaureate exams and he had a high overall average and he was admitted in the Medical college of Cairo University. He studied for one semester there but then they [in ref. to university personnel] told him “You’re Syrian... All Syrians are not allowed here anymore, you need to pay 3500 pounds so we can give you your student ID”. My son told me that he would rather take that money, which we do not have, and attempt to immigrate to Europe than stay here. So, we smuggled him to Sweden. Unfortunately, just a few days after he got to Sweden, we received a message from the Canadian embassy that we were granted refuge in Canada... we were told our file was fast tracked because of my desperate attempt to immigrate illegally to Europe”.*

# Coming to Canada – Male-Female Roles

- *“Of course, here a woman has rights and she has freedoms like men... there are laws and rules that protect her from everything... we don't have that in our countries...”*
- *“Yes, no change because he doesn't want her to put herself on a pedestal and take up a more masculine role in the family because he would then feel like he's the housewife.”*
- *“With every new group of refugees coming here, they are warning them about this... like don't yell at your kids in public., don't yell at your wife in public. So, they're warning them.”*
- *“so that our men are re-programmed to behave better. Not necessarily, not all men are scared now.”*
- *“Some men are not like that, some will tell you “This is who I am, if you like it okay if you don't like it, then I will leave you and travel to someplace else and leave you”.*



# Coming to Canada Services and Programs

- ▶ “yes, we know there are a lot but...”
- ▶ *“Our customs and traditions prevent us from doing this to our husbands... it is “Aib” [in ref. to what is a social taboo]. A woman going to file a complaint about her husband? I swear to Allah whatever it is he would do to me, I would never go and file a complaint about him to strangers.”*
- ▶ Yes, because even if she does file a complaint against her husband, they will call her [in ref. to a woman’s extended family] and they will threaten her in coming to Canada and killing her.
- ▶ I am telling you this in all honesty and in all reality... this is how it is... the woman ends up being scared of her extended family now... because her father will be angry with her, her brother will be angry with her and not talk to her, her sisters would disown her.... this is how it is in reality.



# Coming to Canada Services and Programs

- Yes, and I can tell you why. This is not because we need financial assistance. I can tell you that we as Arab women do not need financial assistance. But it's because when we were raised, we were raised very poorly. An Arab woman would feel weak by herself if she was alone at her own house with her kids and no husband. The first people to dominate her in that situation are her own kids; when if her husband was the strongest figure in the family and he leaves her, her own kids become the strongest members of the family. Specifically, her sons. If her husband leaves, her eldest son would raise his voice and scream at her...



# Coming to Canada Services and Programs

- ▶ *“I do have something to say; so, you mentioned a lot of resources and services that are available for women refugees who are new to Canada and who are experiencing domestic violence... I want to say again that I am not asking because I need these resources but maybe my friends or my neighbors would benefit from them.... I see a lot of refugee women asking on Facebook for a family lawyer or a divorce lawyer... but I just want t to ask who do we reach out to? Give us names...give us telephone numbers...”*

# Interpersonal Violence

- ▶ *“Oh, it affected me a lot... I swear to Allah it affected me a lot. It affected my relationship with my husband a lot and also with my children. Besides, I came here [in ref. to Canada] for my children. I told them that I am patient for your sake. I ended up suffering from depression...”*
- ▶ *“It was due to my husband sitting at home all the time...he’s always at home and he wasn’t sick when we were in Beirut and when we first came here. But now, now he has a hundred illnesses. Now he wears lenses so that he can see, his leg and his arms are affected and he has a scan every other day at the hospital... all of this is because of his constant sedentary state at home.”*
- ▶ *“You know the problem is with war, Allah be with women. The wife always sustains any pressures from her husband... some husbands beat their wives...some of them don’t beat them physically but verbally assault them. Some women were left separated and divorced from their husbands. some were separated from their own children.”*

# Interpersonal Violence

- ▶ *“I would like to say something. We were destroyed in every aspect; mentally, socially, financially, the rich went down to the middle class and the middle class went down to the poor class.”*
- ▶ *“People who have had strong husband/wife relationships may have survived the hardships the war put on them. But people who have had weak relationships to begin with... they would not have survived.”*
- ▶ *“Yes, because usually the mother... usually the mother is who is fighting for her kids access to education and for her kids' safety and security... the husband is usually distracted by finding a job and financial matters of the matter... so I mean... the mother is patient to the very end, she suffers silently from her husband's ill-treatment. In our traditional eastern society this is the norm”*



# Interpersonal Violence

- ▶ *“yes of course... if there is physical beating...if there is even verbal abuse.... sometimes verbal abuse hurts more than physical abuse...”*
- ▶ *“No not just for the kids... it’s also because they’re afraid of what people would say... A divorced woman in our society is not an accepted social member...it may be the case that she will not get any other marriage proposals. and even if she does, she will most definitely get a far worse experience with a new husband...Secondly, her parents cannot cover her expenses and her children’s expenses so she has to leave her kids behind with their father...so it is a far worse circumstance to be in.”*





# A Path of the Future

- ▶ *“A Mother is always and automatically the person who sacrifices the most in a family. What do I want right now? I want my kids to be in the best state possible. But if I leave them to live in the unknown, without an education without access to schools, without anything they will go through what I am going through right now. When my children gain education, they make me proud”.*
- ▶ *“I would like to request some family counselling sessions that bring awareness to families, awareness on family related matters. And not just for women, there are some women who need more education and awareness on family-related matters but some men also need more awareness on family-related matters. Any by the way, this awareness is not related in any way to access to education or gaining an education”.*



# A Path to the Future

- *“So, I am saying that this is something that is missing and should be mandatory sessions for refugee families. And it should be attended as families altogether or men alone and women alone. So, they can raise these men’s awareness on how to handle teenagers, how to treat your wife. And the same sessions and awareness would apply for the wife.”*
- *“I just wanted to add on a very important point this sister mentioned on family counselling and awareness sessions...for the mom and her children and her husband... if this happens it will be amazing for us... “*
- *“She is referring to sessions on teaching parents how to deal and discipline their children properly and raise them properly.”*



# A Path to the Future

- ▶ *“I too want to be able to work... and as the previous sisters mentioned I would like to learn how to speak English fluently and I am very excited to learn English, really, I am.”*
- ▶ *“I am confident that in ten years our lives will become better, now we feel like we’re strangers and we’re far away from home but I know in ten years this country will be our home, we will be used to it’s people, to its language, to everything and it will be our country. We will be able to do everything, and we will most definitely find a job because this country offers a lot of opportunities...”*



# A Path for the Future

- ▶ *“But seriously, I would be able to speak English fluently, I would want my other children, all my children to be living with me... and I would have obtained the Canadian citizenship and then I would be able to tour the world with my passport and no one in Lebanon or in Turkey can tell me that I’m not welcomed there because I’m Syrian”.*