

ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES OF SYRIAN MUSLIM REFUGEE WOMEN IN  
THE U.S.: INTERSECTIONALITY OF NATIONALITY, RELIGION, GENDER,  
AND REFUGEE STATUS

by

Merih Ugurel Kamisli, M.Ed.

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Committee Members:

Ann K. Brooks, Chair

Jovita M. Ross-Gordon

Cheryl L. Fulton

Arlene Serrano Ramos

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## **DEDICATION**

To all women victims and survivors of war.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on acculturation and intersectionality theories, this research explored the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. in order to better understand how the intersection of their national, religious, gender, and refugee identities influence their transition process and lives in the U.S. The study participants were six Syrian Muslim refugee women living in South Central Texas who resettled in the U.S. after the breakout of the 2011 Syrian War. The study addressed the following research questions: What are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.? How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

Data included transcripts from individual interviews, researcher's journal, and field notes. Data analysis was informed by narrative inquiry methods and intersectionality theory. Stories of the participants were analyzed employing Taylor-Powell and Renner's (2003) five data analysis steps: 1) get to know the data; 2) focus the analysis; 3) categorize the information; 4) identify patterns and connections within and between categories; and 5) interpret the data to bring it all together. In the second step of data analysis, the findings were further analyzed using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: interaction, continuity, and situation/place. Within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, place shifted from the war zone to the participant's life in the U.S., time shifted from their life before the war, to fleeing for life, and to resettlement process in the U.S. Finally, the interaction of participants as Syrian

Muslim refugee women were also revealed. The analysis of the data indicates several findings. From the data, it became evident that war traumatized all the participants. Besides the burdens of pre-migration experiences such as loss, fear of the unknown, and grief, the participants reported several challenges they have tried to navigate in their new life. The challenges like language, living in an isolated environment prevent them from taking part in social life and interacting with people from the host community. All the participants except for one who lives more secluded than others, have experienced prejudice and marginalization due to their intersecting identities. The stories of refugee women revealed that being a Syrian, Muslim, Arab, refugee women did intersect in their experiences. Even though they reported some positive interactions with people from the host culture and experienced adjustments in some of their cultural behaviors, the findings indicate that they prefer to maintain their heritage culture and language by interacting mostly with people from their religious and ethnic community.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Problem**

#### **Syrian Civil War, 2011**

Syria, located in Western Asia, borders Turkey to the north, Iraq to the east, Jordan to the south, Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and Israel to the southwest. Syria is a semi-presidential republic that has an authoritarian system of government (Szmagier, 2014). Despite its remarkable cultural uniformity, the population of Syria is religiously and ethnically diverse (Van Dam, 2011). It embraces Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the different sects and schools within each of these religions. The majority of its population are Arabic-speaking (82.5 %) and Sunni Muslims (67 %). While Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims constitute 57.4 % of the population, the remaining population is represented by ethnic or religious minorities (Van Dam, 2011). Islamic sects include Alawis (11.5 %), Druzes (3.0 %), and Ismailis (1.5 %). Greek Orthodox Christians (4.7 %) are the largest community of Christians in Syria (14.1%).

Syria has been governed by a dictatorship since the coup d'état of 1963 (Szmagier, 2014). As a member of the Alawite religious sect developed from the Shiite branch of Islam and a leader of the coup, Hafez Al-Assad became the most important public and military figure in the country. He came to power in 1970 and ruled the country for thirty years (Szmagier, 2014). When he died in 2000, his son Bashar Al-Assad, an ophthalmologist who had not been in any political role before, was elected as the President. Thanks to the support of the chiefs of the army and security forces from the same Alawi sect as the President, Bashar Al-Assad's transition to his father's position

went without problems (Ghadbian, 2001). Bashar Al-Assad followed his father's policy of manipulating religious groups and aimed to assure the Alawites' loyalty by convincing them of their dependence on his political presence (Szmagier, 2014). Besides its attempts to manipulate the religious groups, the Syrian government has embraced anti-Kurdish policies since the 1950s. Even though Kurdish people were the largest non-Arabic ethnic minority with an approximately 1.7 million population in Syria, the political and cultural rights of Kurdish people were taken away (Szmagier, 2014).

In March 2011, a peaceful uprising for reform and rights turned in to a militarized battle between the Kurdish opposition and the Assad regime and resulted in confrontations between other groups as well (Lucas, 2016). These groups included Kurds looking for an independent state, the Islamic State (ISIS), and other foreign actors such as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar who supported rebels with arms, besides a coalition led by the U.S. attacking ISIS (Lucas, 2016).

The Syrian crisis was also influenced by the severe drought between the years of 2005-2011, resulting in the worst drought in the country's history (Zisser, 2017). The natural damage caused by weather conditions overlapped with another crisis caused by the increase in youth population in Syria. The population has become not only young but also impoverished and unemployed. The impact of these demographic changes was felt more on the rural districts. In March 2011, the first significant protests started in the southern Syrian city, Dar'a and spread to the other northern cities and villages such as Hama and Banyas (Lucas, 2016). Demonstrations that initially started to protest the imprisonment and abuse of teenage boys spraying anti-regime graffiti were soon aimed at the economic problems and rulings of the regime officials. "Within a few weeks, the

protests turned into a widespread popular uprising against Bashar al-Assad's whole regime, and ultimately, into a bloody and indecisive civil war" (Zisser, 2017, p. 555). The government security forces responded to the demonstrations using deadly force, mass arrest, and persecution that caused thousands of detainees' death (Lucas, 2016). The regime kept responding to the increasing and expanding protests by attacking with tanks and helicopters as well as restricting resources and communication. In return, some protesters used arms against the regime's forces. Over time, it turned out to be not only an ethnic but also a religious struggle (Zisser, 2017). Some Islamic groups, Syrian locals, and others who came from Arab and Muslim countries came together in the name of "a holy war" (Zisser, 2017, p. 555) and started to fight against the Alawis ruling from Damascus, and associates of the Iranian state and the Hezbollah in Lebanon (Zisser, 2017).

The Syrian crisis became a ground for both regional and international war, aggravated and prolonged by the involvement of superpowers such as U.S.A. and Russia, and regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran (Zisser, 2017). While Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah supported the fight on Bashar's side, Sunni and anti-Iranian Saudi Arabian States, Qatar, and Turkey helped the rebels in order to engage in the battle between the Shiite and Sunni fronts in Syria. After five years of war, by the middle of 2016, around half a million people were killed and approximately ten million Syrians, half of Syria's population, lost their homes becoming refugees fleeing from their country across the borders (Zisser, 2017). Almost five million Syrians become internationally registered refugees as of January 2017. The first-asylum countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq have hosted the vast majority of Syrian refugees (Zong &

Batalova, 2017). Since the war began, around 900,000 Syrians headed to Europe in search of asylum (Zong & Batalova, 2017). The number of Syrian refugees resettled in the U.S. between October 1, 2011 and December 31, 2016 was 18,007, 72 % (or 13,014) of which were women and children under the age of 14. According to the data from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S. in (FY) 2016 went above the goal of the Obama administration's refugee resettlement program (admitting 10,000 Syrians) from just 36 Syrian refugees in FY 2013 to 12,587 in FY 2016 (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

### **Refugee Resettlement in the U.S.**

The Federal Refugee Resettlement Program was created by The Refugee Act of 1980 in order to help refugees' transition to the host countries and help them become economically self-reliant as quickly as possible once they arrive in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012, para. 1). The admission and resettlement of refugees in the U.S. are approved by the Immigration and National Act (INA) which is amended by the Refugee Act 1980 (Bruno, 2016). The number of annual refugee admissions (refugee ceiling) is determined by the President consulting to the Cabinet-level representatives with members of the House and the Senate Judiciary Committees (Bruno, 2016).

The Department of State's (DOS's) Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) coordinates and runs the U.S. Refugee Admission Program (Bruno, 2016). PRM organizes an NGO, international organization or, a contractor for the U.S. embassy to be in charge of a Resettlement Support Center (RSC) which receives and processes the refugee applications to the U.S. that are referred by the UNHCR, a U.S.

Embassy or a non-governmental organization. There are nine RSCs around the world that are funded and managed by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration (PRM) (U.S. Department of State, n. d.). The applicants' information is collected and prepared by the Resettlement Support Center for security screening and review of the background information by the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security and other U.S. Government security agencies. They determine the approval of the resettlement in the U.S. Once the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) approves the refugees for resettlement in the United States, U.S. based resettlement agencies provide "sponsorship assurance" and assistance to the newcomers. A cultural orientation course is provided to the most refugees before their departure to the U.S. (U.S. Department of State, n. d. para. 5).

### **Syrian Refugees Admitted to the U.S.**

According to the UN Refugee Agency's annual Global Trends study, by the end of 2016, 65.6 million people were displaced by force worldwide (Edwards, 2017). The Syrian conflict, now in its eight years, produced the biggest numbers of overall displacement, displacing 12 million people (65 % of the population) domestically or as refugees at the end of 2016 (Edwards, 2017).

In response to the Syrian conflict, in 2015 the United States started to accept more Syrian refugees than before (Zong & Batalova, 2017). During, October 1, 2011, and December 31, 2016, the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S. was 18,007. It has been reported that ninety-eight percent of the Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S. were Muslim and about one percent were Christian (Zong & Batalova, 2017). The

highest number of Syrian refugees (30 %) were received by California (11 %), Michigan (11 %) and Texas (8 %) (Zong & Batalova, 2017, para. 8).

Syrian refugee admission to the U.S. caused public controversy because of concerns about terrorism and national security (Bruno, 2016). After terrorist attacks in different parts of the world between 2015 and 2016, some states in the U.S. started to oppose Syrian Refugee resettlement. However, various organizations working with the U.S. government have been still volunteering to resettle refugees (Zong & Batalova, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of State Refugee Processing Center admission and arrival database (2017), those states opposing to accept Syrian refugees received the minimum number of Syrian refugees. As of the end of 2016, no Syrian refugees resettled in Alabama, Mississippi, and Wyoming. While, ten states (Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and South Dakota) received fewer than 100; nine states (Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Wisconsin) accepted between 100 and 500 Syrian refugees. Just four states; Michigan (1,950 to date), Texas (1,364), Arizona (1,149), and Illinois (1,059) received more than 1,000 Syrian refugees (Zong & Batalova, 2017, para. 10).

### **Background of the Researcher**

Having been affected by the Syrian conflict the most among the other states in the region (Memisoglu & Ilgit, 2016), my home country Turkey has had the leading role in responding to the Syrian crises. Syrian refugees who were not happy in their country were accepted to Turkey as early as April 2011. Within only three months, the Syrian refugee population became 7,000, making Turkey the largest host of Syrian refugees

(Ilgit & Davis, 2013). As the number of Syrian refugees increased, the tension between refugees and the Turkish population has grown primarily in the cities where the refugee camps were located. A field study by Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Center, HUGO (cited in Erdogan, 2014) that investigated the social acceptance and integration of Syrians in Turkey indicates that 87% of Syrian refugees outside of the camps have been in interaction with Turkish locals. While Turkish people understand the humanitarian side of the crisis, they are concerned about the uncontrolled Syrian population that is perceived as threatening not only the economy but security and moral life in Turkey (Erdogan, 2014). Different issues have arisen in border cities and non-border cities relating to the existence of the Syrian population. While in non-border cities, Syrian beggars, security, and social adaptation are the main issues, in border cities, even though the Syrian population has revived the local markets, the scarcity of houses and high rent prices are the biggest concerns for local people. Other concerns include the privileges provided to the Syrian refugees in access to health care services, higher education (admission to the Turkish universities without any requirement whereas Turkish students are subject to competitive admission examination), and competition in employment resulting from the cheaper workforce offered by Syrians. A bigger concern has been about the security issues triggered by the rumors in public about Turkey becoming a hub for armed rebel groups and militants (Ilgit & Davis, 2013).

Syrian civil war and Turkey's "open door" policy for refugee admission affected Turkish society not only socially, politically, and economically but also psychologically (Erdogan, 2014). As a Turkish citizen living in Istanbul, I become critical of the government's Syrian policy when I began to witness heartbreaking life conditions of

Syrian refugees trying to survive literally on the streets. Even though they were survivors of the war in their country, Syrian refugees have become victims of the battle of life in Turkey.

As a new mother, seeing increasing numbers of Syrian women with their children in their arms begging on the streets to feed their kids and hearing the news about women and girls being abused in and out of the refugee camps deeply affected me. As an educator, I worried about the lost future awaiting millions of children and youth. Most importantly, as a human being advocating social justice and human rights, I have been concerned about both the Syrian refugees trying to survive in my country suffering from the uncontrolled and mismanaged consequences of its government policy.

People from your neighboring country, those whom you used to know as tourists, guests, traders, or academicians, some wealthy and well-educated become the millions of people that your country is now trying to shelter, provide with food, healthcare, and education. While the humanitarian side of this endeavor is appreciable, outcomes of uncontrolled refugee admission, lack of resources, and disorder in the distribution of what is available have been worrisome for my country, such that we started to see more and more negative attitudes towards Syrian refugees in our community. Even the educated people I know, cognizant of the realities of war have started to complain about the presence of Syrian refugees. Crime and health care problems have been attributed to the growing number of Syrian refugees living out of refugee camps as if those incidents would have never occurred if it were not for Syrian refugees' presence. Subsequently, these attitudes have resulted in increased discriminatory public discourse and even occurrences of racist violence.

When I left Turkey to study in the U.S. in 2015, I still had heartfelt worries about the ongoing Syrian war and the refugee crisis in Turkey. Meanwhile, in America, immigration and refugee issues were at the center of the presidential elections. Differing perspectives of presidential candidates on immigration and refugee policies, public reaction and debates on these issues and finally the result of the presidential election bringing the Trump administration, which favors strict restrictions in immigration and refugee admission aroused my interest in refugee admission and resettlement process in the U.S.

The following year, as part of my coursework towards the doctoral degree I pursued, I decided to conduct an independent study to learn about the refugee resettlement process in one of the refugee resettlement centers in Austin, Texas. In that study, what struck me the most and inspired me further was one scene that I found myself re-visualizing repeatedly over time. It was the view of women in hijab, sitting on a bench and reading right under the cross symbol hanging on the Presbyterian Church wall, next to a sign which read “*deliberately diverse and fully inclusive*”. What that scene told me was that it was possible to hope for a peaceful future regardless of our differences as long as we had a space for respect, understanding, and improvement. That image and those thoughts made me wonder about the perceptions of refugee and immigrants of the programs they participated in during their resettlement process.

I conducted another independent study, this time solely focusing on the perceptions of refugee and immigrants. I interviewed eleven refugee and immigrants from various countries such as Iraq, Cuba, Sudan, and Afghanistan about their perspectives of the ESL program, and the challenges they face during the resettlement

process. As a non-native speaker coming from the same geographical background as some of the interviewees, I knew that I would have a sensitive ear to their feelings and worries about living in the U.S. and learning and speaking a foreign language. During the interview, there were many times I felt connected and related to their experiences. My interactions with the study participants, specifically with the women, led me to think about how their life outside the classroom would be different in the U.S., considering the cultural differences and their identity as women in their home countries.

Therefore, my background, the recent atmosphere in the U.S. regarding the issues of immigration and the independent studies I conducted as part of my coursework have inspired a direction for my dissertation topic. Since the Syrian Crisis in Turkey was the core reason for my interest in the refugee resettlement in the U.S., I have decided to focus on Syrian Muslim refugee women and their acculturation experiences in the U.S. through the lens of the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status.

### **Problem Statement**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner Grandi, the Syrian crisis is “the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time” (cited in the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees, para. 2, 2016). The number of Syrian refugees resettled in the United States after the Syrian Crisis is 18,007 (the U.S. Department of State Refugee Processing Center, 2016). Among those settled since 2011, 75% are women and children under the age of 14 (Zong & Batalova, 2017).

The review of literature indicates that there are some relevant research studies that investigated acculturation experiences of refugees and immigrants from Syria’s neighboring countries such as Iran, and Iraq (Famili, 1997; Jamil et al., 2007) and a

number of studies focusing on the acculturation experiences of Arab Americans: health of Arab Americans (Aprahamian, Kaplan, Windham, Sutter, & Visser, 2011; Jadalla & Lee, 2012); Arab American youth perception of parental acculturation (Henry, Biran, & Stiles, 2006); Arab Americans' acculturative stress, and depression (Famili, 1997; Wrobel, Farrage, & Hymes, 2009). However, there is limited literature specifically focusing on the experiences of Syrian refugee women in the U.S. who fled from their country after the 2011 Syrian Civil War (see Issa, 2017; Reda, 2017).

Moving to a new culture means interacting with differences in role expectations, values, norms, understandings, and challenges in communication (Levy-Warren, 1987). The research and counseling conducted with refugees in the U.S. discussed by Bemak, Chung, and Pedersen (2003) suggested that refugee experiences show commonalities across groups of refugees coming from different cultures and nationalities. As a result of forced migrations, refugees not only experience a challenged sense of self but also changes in gender roles, language, and socioeconomic status. The researchers also addressed that women are among the subsets of refugees who are especially vulnerable to certain negative experiences. Refugee women not only experience post migration adjustment difficulties but also cope with some serious challenges in the resettlement process (Chung, 2001). In their report for a joint field assessment of risks involved for refugee women and girls, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) address the challenges that refugee women face by the following statement:

Single women traveling alone or with children, pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls, unaccompanied children, early-married children - sometimes themselves with newborn babies - persons with disabilities, and elderly men and women are among those who are particularly at risk and require a coordinated and effective protection response (cited in UNHCR, para.5, 2016).

In the past decade, the UN system and many nongovernmental organizations have also brought attention to the policies addressing specifically the refugee women issues (Martin, 1992). However, not many programs have been developed effectively defining and responding to the needs of refugee women.

Various aspects of refugees' acculturation and post-migration experiences have been studied within the disciplines of psychology, public health, counseling, anthropology, sociology, education, and other social sciences. Employment and welfare issues are studied by some social workers (e.g. Hollister, Martin, Toft, & Yeo, 2005; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002), emotional and psychological aspects of refugee resettlement and acculturation have been the subject of counselors and psychologists (Berry, 1989, 2006; Bemak, Chung, & Pedersen, 2003; Chun, Organista, & Marin, 2003), and refugee mental health also been one of the most largely studied subjects (Beiser & Hyman, 1997; Beiser & Wickrama, 2004; Chung, 2001; Du, Li, Lin, & Tam, 2015).

In the field of adult education, even though there have been basic education, language, literacy, skills training, and professional education programs for refugees that are funded and organized by various non-governmental organizations, or state institutions, not much attention is brought among adult educators unless they worked in resettlement and immigrant-related programs (Guo & Lange, 2015). Those who have

examined migration issues have looked at credential recognition (Guo, 2009), access to the adult education services (Larrotta, 2017), participation in ESL programs (Ullman, 2010), and literacy skills (Wrigley, Chen, White, & Soroui, 2009). Only Alfred (2003) and Skilton-Sylvester (2002) have been specifically interested in the learning experiences of women.

Among a number of research studies that have investigated the refugee experiences (see Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Yu, Ouellet, & Warmington, 2007), Magro and Ghorayshi's (2011) suggested that survival goals in a host culture become more important for many adult newcomers than educational and career goals. Having difficulties in educational accreditation, financial need for reasonable and secure housing, changing dynamics in their family relationships, discrimination, and need for a social network and community engagement are some of the factors that impact and worsen their problems. According to Morrice (2013),

The process of migration disrupts the inherited frames of reference and the accumulated biographical repertoire of knowledge and understanding, and they are forced to learn new behaviors, understand new rules and to adapt to new values and other type of social organization. (p. 253)

In this process, refugees encounter abrupt changes in their life plans from which they have to restructure their lives and reconstruct their identities (Morrice, 2013). That way refugee experiences become a "significant learning" process (p. 267).

Adult education could be refugee and immigrants' first exposure to the American educational system. Thus, it plays an important role in providing effective programs. In order to do that, it is crucial to gain an expanded understanding of immigrants' culture,

history, and expectations (Alfred, 2001). Given the foundational stance that adult education takes on social justice (Lange & Baillie Abidi, 2015) but the paucity of research by adult educators on refugees among other immigrant groups (Brigham, Baillie Abidi, Tastsoglou, & Lange, 2015), studying acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women by explicitly focusing on the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status will expand the limited research on lived experiences of refugees.

Considering both the need to bring further attention to women refugees, and the lack of research specifically focusing Syrian Muslim refugee women who fled to the U.S. after the break of the Syrian war in 2011, the study of acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. contributes to the growing interest among adult educators in understanding the complexity of immigrant experiences.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This section describes the conceptual framework informing the study. The conceptual framework is comprised of Berry's (2003) Acculturation Model and Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

#### **Acculturation Model**

Acculturation involves the contact that occurs both at the group level and individual level causing affective, behavioral, and cognitive changes, namely behavioral changes and acculturative stress, and the changes that occur later in psychosocial and sociocultural adaptation (Sam & Berry, 2010). Berry's (2003) acculturation model outlines the way individual and group level factors link and creates acculturation.

At a group level, Berry (2003) emphasizes the need to understand what essential characteristics two cultural groups had prior to their contact and why they are in a contact relationship. He also points out the importance of learning about the cultural changes that occur in both groups as well as emerging ethnocultural groups within the nondominant group during the acculturation process. At the individual level, Berry (2003) underlines the psychological changes that both groups experience and the way adaptation influences both groups' new situations. According to Berry (2003), these changes can be behavioral changes that are easy to perform such as the way they speak, dress and eat, or they can be complicated and causing problems such as acculturation stress (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987) experienced as feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. Adaptations can happen either in a psychological (internal) way affecting the sense of well-being or self-esteem or in a sociocultural way such as becoming competent in daily intercultural activities (Searle & Ward, 1990).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Since this study aims to understand how the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women, an intersectionality perspective will be used (Crenshaw, 1989) in conjunction with acculturation framework.

Introduced in the late 1980s in anti-discrimination and social movement contexts as a heuristic term in order to draw attention to the controversial dynamics of differences and solidarity of sameness, intersectionality has promoted consideration of gender, race, and other power axes in both political arena and academic disciplines (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), an American critical race scholar who

developed the term intersectionality, criticizes the single categorical axis that focuses on sex and race discriminations separately and suggests that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Based on the intersectionality theory, identity and the world are not experienced through various separate components of self (Wijeyesinghe, 2012). A combination of characteristics such as a person’s race, class, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, sexuality, religion, and nationality influence and form individual and group identities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Since individuals represent various social positions in multiple identities, they can experience power and marginality simultaneously (Wijeyesinghe, 2012). Besides its emphasis on a more holistic perspective of identity and focus on the experiences of overlooked groups, intersectionality is an instrument to advocate social justice and abolish social inequality (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011).

Considering Syrian Muslim women identity, refugee status, increase in discrimination towards people with Arab and Middle Eastern background after the September 11, 2000 event (Ajrouch, 2005), and recent discriminatory atmosphere against immigrants in most regions of the United States aggravated by the policies and practices of President Trump’s administration (Larrotta, 2017), study of the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S., using an intersectionality framework, is warranted.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. through the lens of the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status. The following research questions guided the study:

- What are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.?
- How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

## **Definition of Terms**

In order to maintain a better understanding and clarity throughout the study, I provided the commonly used terms and their definitions as used in this study.

**Refugee** “is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries” (UNHCR, 2017).

**Immigrant** is defined as “any alien in the United States, except one legally admitted under specific nonimmigrant categories (INA section 101(a)(15))”. “An alien admitted to the United States as a lawful permanent resident” is called permanent resident alien. “Permanent residents are also commonly referred to as immigrants” (Department of Homeland Security, 2017, para. na).

**Resettlement** is “the relocation and integration of people (refugees, internally displaced persons, etc.) into another geographical area and environment, usually in a third country. In the refugee context, the transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another State that has agreed to admit them” (International Organisation for Migration, 2011).

**Acculturation** is the process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of intercultural contact (Berry, 2003).

**Adaptation** refers to the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to external demands (Berry, 2005, p. 709).

**Assimilation** refers to the preference for not maintaining heritage culture but participating in the dominant society (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

**Separation** refers to the preference for maintaining heritage culture and avoidance to interact with the dominant society (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

**Marginalization** refers to the preference for neither maintaining one’s heritage culture nor having relations with the dominant society (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

**Integration** refers to the preference for both maintaining one’s heritage culture, and participation in the dominant society (Berry & Sabatier, 2011).

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women living in the U.S. and intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status. The first chapter provides the background to the problem, and the researcher, problem statement, significance of the study, conceptual framework, research purpose and research questions, and finally the definition of the

terms used in the document. Following chapters include the literature review, the methodology of the study, the stories of the participants, the themes and interpretations findings, and finally conclusion and recommendations for further research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature indicated that the information on the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women who migrated to the U.S. after the break of the Syrian war in 2011 was limited. However, there were some relevant research studies in which the acculturation experiences of refugees and immigrants from Syria's neighboring countries Iran and Iraq were investigated (Famili, 1997; Jamil et al., 2007). Additionally, a number of researchers focused on the acculturation experiences and its relation to mental and the general health of Arab Americans (Aprahamian, Kaplan, Windham, Sutter, & Vissar, 2011; Jadalla & Lee, 2012), Arab American youth perception of parental acculturation (Henry, Biran, & Stiles, 2006), and acculturative stress and depression (Famili, 1997; Wrobel, Farage, & Hymes, 2009). However, not many studies have been conducted focusing on the aspects of acculturation (Awad, 2010) and acculturation experiences of Syrian refugees (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018).

A comprehensive body of research on Arab Americans was provided by Semaan (2014). One category he overviewed was the research on the identity formation of Arab Americans and historical perspectives on their immigration including those mainly from Iraq and Syria (Ajrouch, 1999; Elkholy, 1966; Friedhelm, 1986; Haddad, 1994; Haddad and Lummis, 1987; Hitti, 1923; Joseph, 1999; Naff, 1985; Seikaly, 1999; Shain, 1996; Suleiman, 1994). Findings of the research conducted by Elkholy (1966) on Muslim communities indicated that occupation was one of the primary factors that influence the assimilation of immigrants. The role of women in the family and public life was also emphasized in some studies (Elkholy, 1966; Haddad & Lummis, 1987; Naff, 1985).

In an earlier study, Faragallah, Schumm, and Webb (1997) surveyed Arab American immigrants in order to measure acculturation, their life satisfaction in the U.S., family life satisfaction, and other variables. The results of the study suggested greater life satisfaction but lower family satisfaction when acculturation to the mainstream culture was higher. The more extended residency in the U.S. and younger age at the time of immigration and being Christian were also related to higher acculturation than being Muslim. Acculturation level was determined by the measures of identification with U.S. culture, engagement with American cultural practices, American friendship, income, gender role orientation, permissiveness regarding attitudes of children, and use of English as a primary language. Even though discrimination experiences were related to low life satisfaction in the U.S., they were not significantly associated with acculturation. However, the reason behind the lack of association between discrimination and acculturation was not discussed.

Amer and Hovey (2007) conducted a study with 120 second-generation Arab Americans from twenty states in order to examine the ethnic identity of Arabs living in the U.S. In this study, they used the Arab Ethnic Identity Measure (AEIM) and a questionnaire with subscales: Religious-Family Values, Sense of Belonging, and Ethnic Arab Practices. Acculturation was assessed using the Arab Acculturation Scale (AAS) and the Arab Acculturative Strategy Scale. Participants were affiliated with Islam (54%) and Christianity (36%). The study findings showed that Christian Arab respondents experienced significantly higher assimilation into American culture than Muslim Arabs. Arab Muslims showed significantly higher involvement in Arab ethnic, family, and religious practices. Acculturative stress, family functioning, or depression were not

different between groups. However, compared to male participants, female participants reported more Arab ethnic practices (eating Arabic food, listening to Arabic music, and speaking and writing Arabic) and stronger religious feelings and beliefs.

In a more recent study, Awad (2010) explored the impact of acculturation, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation on Arab and Middle Eastern descent individuals. The study used 177 participants and measured ethnic society immersion and dominant society immersion aspects of acculturation, religious affiliation, and ethnic identity. Dominant society immersion is defined as “the extent to which individuals adopt or adhere to dominant society values, beliefs, and behaviors”, while ethnic society immersion refers to “the extent to which individuals hold on to or adopt beliefs, values, and behaviors believed to be a part of their ethnic heritage” (Awad, 2010, p. 60). The results of the study indicated that Arab/Middle Eastern Americans who were lower in dominant society immersion were more likely to report higher levels of discrimination. A higher level of discrimination was reported by Muslims than Christians. They also reported a higher level of ethnic society immersion, ethnic identity affirmation, belonging and less dominant society immersion than Christians. The most discrimination was experienced by Muslims who had a higher level of dominant society immersion. The findings of this study show that discrimination is still an ongoing problem for Arab Americans/Middle Eastern Americans. One of the limitations of the study was the use of a scale that was designed to measure acculturation of different ethnic groups. One of the suggestions for future studies was the use of acculturation scales to measure cultural aspects specific to Arab/Middle Eastern Americans. Since some nationalities were over represented in this

study, investigating the actual proportions of this population was another recommendation for the future of research.

Another relevant research study focused on the effects of gender, religion, nationality, and sojourner status on the acculturation modes of Arab Americans (Semaan, 2015). The research examined how religion, nationality, and gender of participants impacted their behaviors towards their own and the mainstream cultures and perceived discrimination. The study further investigated the relationship between religion, nationality (Arab country of origin), gender, immigration generation, perceived discrimination, sojourner status and acculturation modes defined by Berry (1980) (isolation, assimilation, integration and marginalization). Self-administered questionnaires with closed-ended questions were provided to the participants of Arab origin (304 participants) living in thirteen different states in the U.S. In this study, participants showed positive attitudes towards both their host country and Arabic cultural background. Although the participants did not perceive too much discrimination in general, the findings indicated that participants' perceived discrimination by the mainstream culture and their attitude towards their country of origin were significantly impacted by their religion and nationality. In this study, Muslim participants were more likely to perceive discrimination than Christians. In terms of nationality, there was a significant difference in perceived discrimination of Palestinians and Syrians. Palestinians were more likely to perceive discrimination against Arabs by the dominant culture than Syrians. The reason behind the difference between nationalities in the degree of perceived discrimination was attributed to the American political stance towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the recent situation in Syria that might have influenced

Syrians' feelings of being secure in the U.S. While sampling only Arab-American participants was the strength of this study, the methodology of classifying participants' responses into the four acculturation modes using self-administered, closed-ended survey questions limited the study findings to categorical variables and survey responses.

Finally, one study examined the experiences of Arab Muslim immigrant women living in the U.S. (Khatib, 2013). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen participants. The results of the study indicate the complexity of the Arab Muslim immigrant women acculturation experiences. American political approach to the Islamic world creates distrust and fear among this population. Besides that, the Arab Muslim culture and the culture in the U.S. differ concerning their values and traditions. Among the gender roles given to women in Arab Muslim culture, preserving the Arab culture and ethnic background are prominent. Thus, Arab Muslim women in this study were afraid that their children would lose their Arab and religious identity by assimilating into the U.S. culture completely. The findings also revealed that the way women viewed their world and behaved was more of a result of their experiences in the U.S. rather than through their religious beliefs. The challenges they tried to cope with when they came to the U.S. were influential on their current views and behaviors. One of the future indications of the study was the need to identify strategies to support and understand Arab Muslim women's identity in order to help them navigate the complexities of acculturation experience (Khatib, 2013).

One of the common findings of the above cited studies is that Muslim Arabs perceive and report more discrimination than Christians and they have different acculturation experiences (defined as assimilation to the U.S. culture or level of dominant

culture immersion). The literature review provides very useful insights on the acculturation experiences of Arab Americans and variables such as religion, perceived discrimination, gender, life satisfaction, and ethnic background affecting their acculturation process. However, it is challenging to define cultural commonalities that are applicable to all ethnic groups within the Arab/Middle Eastern immigrant category (e.g. Egyptian, Palestinian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, Moroccan) as each ethnic group may have differences in term of their beliefs, practices, and values (Awad, 2010).

### **Adult Education Services and Refugees**

Federally funded adult education programs are authorized by The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) which provides funding for adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a second language (ESL) programs for adults including immigrants who aim to learn and improve basic reading, writing, and English language skills. Those programs also help adults to complete secondary school; transition to postsecondary education, and civics education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). For refugees among immigrants, The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services aims to provide opportunities to help them become self-dependent individuals by reaching their full potential in the United States. The services and benefits for refugees include cash and medical assistance in up to 8 months for qualifying status, and Refugee Social Services which are available up to 5 years from the admission date to the U.S. Refugee Social Services comprise employment services; job readiness and job search; English language and vocational preparation; translation services; and case management (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2019).

While those services help the transition of refugees in the host community in the first months of their arrival, they are limited to certain time and do not provide long term extensive education programs that would help successful adaptation of refugee and asylums in the U.S. (Larrotta, 2017). Besides the federally funded programs, non-profit, publicly funded community-based organizations, churches and libraries also provide adult education services for refugees among other immigrants and play an important role in supporting their education and adaptation (Chao & Kuntz, 2013; Larrotta, 2017).

A number of adult educators explored the experiences of immigrants who participate in adult education programs (Adamuti-Trache, 2012; Chao & Mantero, 2014; Lee, 2013; Magro, 2008; Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011; Pete, 2016; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). For example, focusing on the lived experiences of four Cambodian women, Skilton-Sylvester (2002) explored the participation of adult refugee learners in adult ESL programs based on 4 months of participant observation in an adult learning center. The researcher conducted in depth interviews with participants, and had yearlong small group tutoring sessions, and informal discussions. In addition, the teachers of each class and the administrators of the program were interviewed. In the study, exploring the commonalities they share as Cambodian women such as language, history, and cultural background were essential to understand their investment in participating in adult ESL program. The study showed that participants' shifting roles (being spouses, mothers, sisters and/or daughters, workers) in and out of the classroom influenced their decision to participate in the ESL programs. The findings indicate that it is essential to consider multiple selves of learners, as well as their lived experiences when developing curriculum and pedagogy for refugee learners (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Similarly, Magro (2008)

explored the lived experiences of adult learners in their homeland and in an ESL program. Besides the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with 10 adult learners, the researcher interviewed educators of the program and asked them about the challenges of working with a vulnerable population. The findings of the study indicated that refugee learners' experience of stress and trauma because of their pre-migration experiences effected their learning and adjustment. The research emphasized the unique role of adult educators in guiding, advocating, and providing resources to the refugee adult learners in their learning process. The study also pointed out the need for professional development programs for adult educators teaching adults from war-affected backgrounds on the effects of trauma on learning; global and political issues, and providing culture relevant curriculum (Magro, 2008). In a multi-sited ethnographic study, Chao and Mantero (2014) investigated the ways in which Latino and Asian immigrant parents' language learning through church-based ESL program influenced the literacy in their families. The findings showed that participation in church-based ESL programs not only empowered literacy in the family but also promoted a variety of family literacy practices, home language practices, parental agency, and community engagement as social mediators (Chao & Mantero, 2014).

As cited studies also suggest, adult education plays an important role in providing effective programs for immigrants (Alfred, 2001). Thus, it is crucial to gain an expanded understanding and knowledge of diverse groups of immigrants, their culture, history, and expectations (Alfred, 2001). In order to contribute to our understandings of the lived experiences of refugees among other immigrants, this current study aimed to investigate the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. by

specifically focusing on the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status.

The study was informed by acculturation theory and models, multiple identity approach, and intersectionality theory. Therefore, the following section discusses three bodies of literature a) acculturation theory and models, b) multiple identities approach, and c) intersectionality theory

### **Definitions of Acculturation**

Acculturation as a concept was recognized by both sociologists and anthropologist throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to explain what would happen when people with various cultural backgrounds and languages contact one another (Park, 1928; Park & Burgess, 1921; Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936). The term “acculturation” became well-recognized by Robert Park (Persons, 1987) who was a sociologist at the University of Chicago from 1914-1936, known as the melting pot theorist and one of the pioneer researchers studying U.S. immigrant communities (Kucher, 2006). In this model, Park suggested that when people with different backgrounds come into contact with each other, they try to accommodate each other in order to avoid disputes that would derive from their differences. Therefore, contact is considered to be the moderator between groups of people from various communities. With an assimilationist perspective, Park (1928) proposed that “Every nation, upon examination, turns out to have been a more or less successful melting-pot” (p. 883) through amalgamation, acculturation, and eventually assimilation of diverse groups at a different speed and different ways. In his analysis of Park’s theory, White (1948) defines amalgamation as “a biological process through which

the fusion of races is effected by interbreeding and intermarriage” (p. 54) and assimilation as “the fusion of cultures” (p. 54).

Acculturation was proposed as a group-level phenomenon by anthropologists Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936, p. 149):

Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals sharing different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. ... Under this definition, acculturation is to be distinguished from ... assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation.

Unlike Park’s assimilationist model, in their definition of acculturation, Redfield et al. (1936) emphasized that assimilation would be only a phase of acculturation, but it would not necessarily occur readily during the acculturation process.

In 1954, Social Science Research Council (SSRC) suggested a formulation that included “a selective adaptation of value systems, the process of integration and differentiation, the generation of developmental sequences, and the operation of role determinants and personality factors” (p. 974) as the dynamics of acculturation. Just like assimilation could, SSRC emphasized that acculturation could also trigger refusal of change and encourage new cultural forms that can be found in neither of the cultural groups or delay the occurrence of changes to later years. Graves (1967) then coined the term “psychological acculturation” referring to the changes that an individual experiences when in contact with another culture or when influenced directly by the other culture, or by changing the culture that s/he belongs. Graves (1967) made a distinction between changes that would occur as a result of acculturation at an individual and at a group level.

While at a group level the acculturation changes the culture collectively, at an individual level, acculturation changes the individual's psychology.

Berry (1989), a researcher in the field of cross-cultural psychology, suggested a framework for acculturation that also emphasizes the distinction between the population (ecological, cultural, social and institutional) and the individual (the behaviors and traits of persons). Berry (1997) stated that in order to analyze the relationship between two variables, it is essential to make this distinction. Moreover, individuals would experience acculturation of their groups at different levels. According to Berry (1989):

The term *culture change* refers to the process that results in population-level changes that are due to dynamic internal events. The term *acculturation* refers to the process that results in population-level changes that are due to contact with other cultures. Finally, the term *psychological acculturation* refers to the process by which individuals change, both by being influenced by contact with another culture and by being participants in the general acculturative changes under way in their own culture. (p. 204)

Recently, with the impact of global migration, new terms such as biculturalism, multiculturalism, integration and globalization have been used for acculturation or as alternative concepts (Sam & Berry, 2010).

### **Concept of Acculturation**

The early research conceptualized acculturation as a unidimensional and unilinear process in which immigrants were assumed to be eventually incorporated into the receiving society through "the disappearance of the ethnic group as a separate entity and the evaporation of its distinctive values" (Gordon, 1964, p. 81). This uni-dimensional

model suggested that immigrants would leave their cultural heritage as they adopt the new values, beliefs, and way of life. Theoretically, the unidimensional approach did not provide any alternatives to assimilation since it placed the individuals on a continuum of identities that was either entirely heritage or entirely mainstream society's culture (Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000). It was only after the early 1980s that the cultural psychologists started to acknowledge that immigrants would not automatically discard their cultural heritage when they adopt the host country's culture (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010).

Berry's two-dimensional model (1974, 1980) has been the most extensively researched approach to a bi-dimensional process (Ryder et al., 2000). His model suggested two independent dimensions: a) an individual's links to the original culture (cultural maintenance), b) an individual's links to the society of settlement (cultural contact). He proposed that these links can be displayed either as different acculturation attitudes (preferences to take part in both cultures) or as behavior; such as using the language or building social relationships. Therefore, Berry (2005) defined acculturation as "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (p. 698). He proposed that these changes would occur either at an individual level as behavioral changes or at a group level as social structures, institutions, or cultural changes. Berry's bi-dimensional model (1980) provided a more advanced concept for acculturation compared to the unidimensional models (e.g., Cuéllar, Harris, & Jasso, 1980; Olmeda, 1979).

Likewise, Phinney (1990) proposed a bi-dimensional approach that suggested two independent dimensions for people's cultural identity. These independent identities are in relation to both their original culture and the culture of the societies where they settle. In the acculturation process, while cultural changes occur in a group's economic, political and daily life, psychological changes occur in individuals' cultural identities, orientation and social behaviors in connection with the host culture (Phinney, 2003).

### **Acculturation Theory and Models**

#### **Berry's Theory of Acculturation**

As a result of immigration, culturally plural communities with diverse backgrounds get to live together (Berry, 1997). Three factors are defined to explain a variety of cultural groups in plural communities: voluntariness, mobility, and permanence. While some groups, like immigrants, exist voluntarily, refugees or indigenous people migrate because they have to change their location. Those who migrate voluntarily (e.g. immigrants) become permanent in where they settle. However, it is temporarily settlement for those who are guests, students, or asylum-seeking sojourners (Berry, 1997).

In these plural communities, the issue of how to acculturate arises both at a group and individual level. Berry (1997) suggests that individuals and groups use strategies deriving from two major issues that acculturating people would experience: "*cultural maintenance* (to what extent are cultural identity and characteristics considered to be important, and their maintenance strived for); and *contact* and *participation* (to what extent should they become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves)" (p. 9).

From non-dominant groups' standpoint, when individuals avoid maintaining their cultural identity and look for interaction with the dominant culture, the *assimilation* strategy is used (Berry, 1997). In this strategy, the individuals prefer to be absorbed into the dominant culture. However, when individuals prefer to keep their own culture and avoid a relationship with the other culture, the *separation* strategy is used (Berry, 1997). In this strategy, individuals refrain from receiving culture acquisition and, instead of valuing their heritage culture. When individuals choose to maintain their heritage culture while involving themselves in daily interactions with other groups, an *integration* strategy becomes the option (Berry, 1997). In this strategy, the heritage culture is maintained to some extent, but individuals also look for interaction with the other cultural groups as well. Lastly, if individuals are neither interested in their heritage culture nor in getting involved in the other cultural groups, then *marginalization* is defined (Berry, 1997). These acculturation strategies were proposed considering that the non-dominant groups have the freedom to choose how they would acculturate (Berry, 2003). Thus, in 1974, Berry proposed another dimension called *acculturation expectations* to emphasize the role of the dominant group on the acculturation process. In this dimension, when assimilation is the preference of the dominant group, the process is called the pressure cooker. When separation is imposed by the dominant group it is called segregation. When the dominant group wants marginalization, the process is called ethnocide. In terms of integration, Berry (cited in Berry, 2003) proposes that it can be chosen only when the dominant culture encourages cultural diversity. When dominant culture prefers diversity as the process of integration, it is defined as multiculturalism (Berry, 2003).

Berry's Acculturation model has been criticized in terms of conceptualizing and measuring acculturation (Rudmin, 2003, 2009; Ward & Geeraert, 2016). One of the criticisms has been the interaction approach to categorization of acculturation that causes people to be classified as either high or low on receiving culture acquisition and heritage culture retention. As a result, the classification across the categories are found unstable and not comparable across studies (Demes & Geeraert, 2014; Ward & Kus, 2012). More recent research (Schwartz et al. 2015; Des Rosiers, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Ham, & Huang, 2013; Stevens, Veen, & Vollebergh, 2014) used latent class analysis which is an empirical clustering technique to assign individuals in categories according to the observed patterns in the data (Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008). They indicated that the heritage culture and settlement culture orientations were not able to replicate the four categories suggested by Berry (1980). The validity of marginalization as an acculturation strategy has been also questioned in some studies (e.g. Schwartz & Zamboanga, 2008; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980).

Schwartz and Zamboanga (2008) investigated to what extent Berry's (1997) acculturation orientation categories—assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization—would be defined by the latent classes emerged from the analysis. They utilized measures of heritage and American cultural orientations in order to create latent classes for Hispanic college student participants. Ethnic identity, value-based indices of cultural identity, familial socialization, acculturative stress, and perceived discrimination were used as external variables. In accordance with Berry's model, the results showed that second-generation immigrants experienced a combination of assimilation and integration (either assimilated or became American-oriented bi-cultural), while first-

generation immigrants were more likely to experience partial biculturalism or separation. However, marginalization did not come out as a significant sized cluster. Highest marginalization score was found in the very small “undifferentiated” class. Since, all four acculturation categories emerged in this class, it was attributed to individuals’ confusion about their cultural identities. The results of the study indicated similar acculturation orientations to what Berry proposed, yet, they seemed to be less distinguished than what his theory suggests.

**Acculturative stress.** The acculturation literature is concerned with two basic psychological acculturation outcomes, behavioral changes and acculturative stress, and two particular adaptation terms, psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry, 2003). When individuals experience an easy acculturation process, behavioral changes occur easily as well. Berry (1992) suggested that within culture shedding and culture learning processes, individuals replace their behaviors with the behaviors they adjust to in a selective, accidental or deliberate way. Since the adaptive changes mostly occur at an individual level, Ward and Kennedy (1993) called this process adjustment (cited in Berry, 2003). When the individual accepts the norms of the dominant culture in case of some conflict, assimilation occurs. However, when individuals experience a greater level of conflict resulting in problematic experiences, the process is conceptualized as “acculturative stress” (Berry, 2005).

Berry’s work on acculturative stress underlined the affective perspective (Sam & Berry, 2010), which focuses on the emotions and psychological health. His model, drawing upon Lazarus and Folkman’s stress model (1984), proposed that acculturation stress occurs when individuals cannot cope with and adjust to some problematic and

challenging experiences (Berry & Sam, 2010). However, since personal differences such as age, gender, and social support have an impact on what these experiences mean for individuals, not all changes or experiences resulting from the acculturation process would cause acculturative stress. In terms of how to mediate between acculturation strategy and outcomes, Berry (1989) emphasized the role of acculturation goals and expectations on the acculturation process. He pointed to the importance of power or control over the acculturation goals and the expectation of individuals to get involved in the other culture.

### **ABC's of Acculturation**

Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) expanded on Berry's framework for stress and coping in the acculturation process. They integrated the stress and coping, cultural learning and social identification perspectives by identifying three major theoretical approaches to the study of intercultural contact and change. In their model, termed the *ABCs of acculturation*, Ward et al. (2001) highlighted the importance of "Affect, Behavior, and Cognition" in the acculturation process, through a) the stress and coping framework: emotional aspect of acculturation such as well-being and satisfaction; b) the culture learning approach: behavioral aspect of acculturation that focuses on learning cross-cultural verbal, non-verbal communication skills, rules, norms and conventions; and c) the social identity perspective: the cognitive aspect of acculturation that refers to how people view themselves and others in an intercultural relationship.

**Affective perspective.** Affective perspective comprises stress, a coping framework for acculturation. The stress and coping framework emphasizes the importance of the changes in lifestyle, and how these changes are interpreted and managed during cross-cultural interaction using coping strategies (Ward et al., 2001).

According to this framework, the changes that occur as a result of intercultural contact trigger stress and therefore produce behavioral and cognitive coping reactions. Both personal characteristics and the context (characteristics of the situation) affect stress, coping, and processes of adjustment. Besides not being voluntarily in the transition process, among those engaging in cross-cultural contact, refugees are considered to be affected by traumatic pre-immigration experiences the most (Ward et al., 2001). Therefore, not only cultural and personality differences, but also the socio-cultural and political context of the country to which they transition influence the acculturation experience either by helping or preventing their cultural learning.

**Behavioral perspective.** Behavioral perspective is a culture learning approach. Ward et al. (2001) define culture learning as “the process whereby sojourners acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in their new society” (p. 51). The culture learning approach draws upon Argyle’s (1969) social skills and interpersonal behaviors work and assumes that the challenging experiences of newcomers in their daily social interactions result in cross-cultural problems (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). This approach can be seen in some communication studies emphasizing the significance of language proficiency, personal differences, motivation and ability to adapt in intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 1993; Kim, 1977, 1991).

There are two directions that culture learning theory has developed over the years. One direction has been towards analyzing socio-psychological aspects of the intercultural encounters under the communication style or competence framework by social psychologists and communication theorists (Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles, & Coupland, 1988; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Kim, 1991). The other has been developed

more towards an understanding of sociocultural adaptation by the cultural differences in communication styles, norms, and values (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation, referring to the “ability to “fit in” or negotiate effective interactions in a “new cultural milieu” (Masgoret & Ward, 2006, p. 60), is placed in the behavioral domain. It requires not only knowledge and competence in communication and social interaction skills but also an adaptation to the cultural norms, values, or view of the world. In that sense, Ward et al. (2001) differentiate sociocultural adaptation from psychological adaptation and explains that the latter would refer to psychological well-being and satisfaction and can be explained with a stress coping framework. Even though there is some interrelation between psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation conceptually, they are empirically distinct (Brisset, Sabatier, Safdar, & Lewis, 2010). Psychological adaptation is predicted by variables such as personal characteristics, life changes, and social support whereas socio-cultural adaptation is predicted by cultural identity, language and knowledge of culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a, b). They also follow distinct patterns of variation by time (Ward et al., 2001) such that sociocultural adaptation shows a more predictable pattern; in the early stages of cross-cultural contact adaptation occurs fast, then it slows down, and becomes stabilized (Ward & Kennedy, 1996) while psychological adaptation varies over time even though more problems occur in the early stages of adaptation.

Research by Searle and Ward (1990) suggests that extraversion, life changes, and satisfaction of the relationship with the host country predicted psychological adaptation in Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand. The researchers employed a 23-page questionnaire given to one hundred and five Malaysian and Singaporean students in

New Zealand. The study aimed to examine psychological well-being (depression) and sociocultural competence (social difficulty) in connection with variables such as: expected difficulty, cultural distance, social interactions with both host and other nationals, behaviors towards hosts, extraversion, changes in life and personal variables (age, gender, duration of residency in New Zealand, cross-cultural training and experiences). The multiple regression analysis indicated an interrelation between psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross cultural transitions. However, the results of the study provided empirical support to distinguish psychological and sociocultural adaptation factors. The social difficulty, changes in life, extraversion, and satisfaction with hosts predicted psychological adjustment whereas, expected difficulty, cultural distance and depression predicted sociocultural adjustment (Searle & Ward, 1990).

**Cognitive perspective.** Cognitive perspective comprises social identification theories. As a result of international migration, immigrants continuously reformulate and define many aspects of the self and various personal and social identities in their new cultural environment (Padilla & Perez, 2003). The social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986) is considered to be the beginning of this approach (Sam & Berry, 2010). According to this theory, individuals tend to categorize themselves to be able to relate with the groups they would like to be associated with (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The way they identify themselves with the larger societal structures such as groups, organizations, and institutions influence their internal processes (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Group identity becomes an important part of self-concept since it provides a sense of belonging and self-esteem. In the acculturation context, social identity theory is

interested in understanding how identity is defined by individuals in relation to their ethnic community and its members and the larger group they settle in and acculturate (Phinney, 1990).

Another conceptual framework that emphasizes the cognitive approach was suggested by Padilla and Perez (2003). They focus on the role of social cognition; mental processes leading social interaction and social identity; individual's identification of themselves through larger social groups such as organizations, cultures, and social stigma; and having a characteristic that bears undervalued social identity in a particular context to study the processes involved in acculturation. Padilla and Perez (2003) suggest that the newcomers, sojourners, refugees, or voluntary immigrants, regardless of their heritage culture, come with their social identities and also establish new identities in their new environment changing their social cognition. Their social cognition, the ways they understand and beliefs about themselves and others, influences not only their lifestyles (what they wear, what they eat, or what they value) but also the strategies they use to integrate into the new society and people. This framework also points to the effect of social stigma on the acculturation and argues that especially people with visible stigmas such as accents, race, and physical disabilities cannot conceal their stigmas from those who would stereotype or judge them. They may become less eager to acculturate if they feel the discrimination against themselves. Therefore, the way they interpret and perceive their social stigma guides their acculturation process (Padilla & Perez, 2003). The social cognitive approach to acculturation informs this study since Syrian Muslim refugee women have both physical and visible social stigmas such as hijab and accent in English.

**Developmental perspective.** Developmental perspective includes ontogenetic changes. Recently, there have been concerns about the lack of attention to the developmental perspectives on acculturation. According to some views, the acculturation of young people should be considered developmental (Oppedal, 2006). Acculturation as a general concept acknowledges the existing cognitive and behavioral structures that might be influenced by the interaction with different cultures. The acculturation development model situates the developmental process into two domains: the child's own ethnic group, and that of the dominant society (Oppedal, 2006) within which "the child develops domain-specific cultural working models to guide and direct its activities" (p. 98).

### **Interactive Acculturation Model**

Some researchers expanded Berry's model by introducing other relevant variables that could have an impact on the immigrants' and host society's acculturation options or preferences. An interactive acculturation model (IAM) developed by Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, and Senecal (1997) focuses on the dynamic interaction between the host community and immigrant acculturation orientations, and the state integration policies. As a result of this interaction, consensual, problematic, and conflictual relational acculturation outcomes are predicted between the immigrants and the host society. Contrary to the acculturation approaches that assume freedom of choice in how individuals or groups engage in intercultural interactions (e.g., Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006), this approach points to the influence of settlement policies in acculturation process for both immigrant and host society. In that respect, this model provides another perspective for investigating in my study, especially when the recent changes in settlement policies in the U.S. (Zong & Batalova, 2017) are considered.

## **Relative Acculturation Extended Model**

Navas and colleagues (Navas et al., 2005; Navas, Rojas, Garcia, & Pumares, 2007) propose a model called Relative Acculturation Extended Model (RAEM). In the RAEM, different acculturation options can be preferred and adopted in different interactions depending on the seven domains of interaction (political, work, economic, social, family, religious and ways of thinking) in which immigrants and host cultures adopt acculturation strategies and attitudes (Navas et al., 2005). One of the contributions of this model is the way it differentiates between acculturation strategies and attitudes (Navas et al., 2007, p. 70).

That is, between the real plane, those acculturation options, which immigrants say they have put into practice in their new society, and those the natives perceive that the immigrants have adopted, and the ideal plane, those options that the immigrants would use if they could choose, and those natives would prefer for the immigrants. According to RAEM, acculturation process is complicated since people are selective of the acculturation options depending on the circumstances and certain areas in their life. These areas are categorized as seven domains from the nearest to the world's material or peripheral elements (political, work, economic), to those farthest away, such as symbolic representation, ideology or religion (religious beliefs and customs, ways of thinking— principles and values—) with intermediate areas (social and family relationships) (Navas, et al., 2007, p. 70).

This model informs my study in the way it proposes different acculturation options for various domains including religion, which is one of the variables that this study will explore in Syrian Muslim refugee women's acculturation.

### **Ecological Acculturation Framework**

The ecological acculturation framework (EAF) is built on Bronfenbrenner's (as cited in Salo & Birman, 2015) approach on human development that progress through microsystems to other levels of systems. A macrosystem is considered to be the largest system embracing proximal systems and representing the cultural context (Salo & Birman, 2015). According to EAF, individuals participate in different groups of settings with different life goals for each group (professional, family, and social life) they participate in. As within these settings, different cultural contexts are preferred for different activities people engage in. Therefore, while immigrants are culturally oriented towards the host country's culture for the school and occupational domains, they might be more oriented to the heritage culture at home, when they are with their families (Salo & Birman, 2015).

The ecological acculturation framework underlines domain specificity. Domain specificity is referred to as "the notion that host and heritage culture acculturation have advantages in specific contexts of immigrants' lives" (Salo & Birman, 2015, p. 396). For example, being more host culture acculturated in the occupational domain could result in occupational success, and as a result, it would decrease psychological stress. Using the Ecological Acculturation Framework, Salo and Birman (2015) explored the relationships across several life domains for an adult Vietnamese refugee community sample in the U.S. In this study, the researchers analyzed data from a cross-sectional survey. Measures

comprised psychological adjustment, acculturation, job satisfaction, and co-ethnic social support satisfaction. Results of the study show that in the occupation domain, the American acculturation diminished psychological distress. Even though Vietnamese acculturation predicted satisfaction with co-ethnic social support, it did not predict reduced psychological distress. One of the limitations of the study was that it lacked the analysis of cultural characteristics of the occupational context. Therefore, it could not explain the reason why Vietnamese acculturation was related to job satisfaction. This approach is valuable in highlighting the importance of certain domains and their cultural characteristics of refugee acculturation.

### **Critiques of Acculturation Studies**

Growing globalization, transnationalism, and altering demographics of countries demand revising and developing the conceptualization and measurement of acculturation (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Some critical literature on acculturation research points out the complexity of acculturation process in terms of understanding culture in dynamic historical contexts and the unique way of individuals' meaning making of their experiences and identities (Rudmin, Wang, & Castro, 2016).

In his analysis of 42 articles published related to acculturation between 2001 and 2006, from the main journals that represent the contemporary approach to acculturation research, Chirkov (2009) pointed out the dominant methodology and theoretical conceptualization used in acculturation studies. He concluded that acculturation is investigated mostly through the lens of logical empiricism with a confirmatory nature, using intensive statistics and liability techniques, and existing theories to confirm validity and justification of empirical generalizations found in the previous research. Chirkov

(2009) highlighted the lack of interpretative mode, ethnography, participatory observations, qualitative interviewing, and other methods of data collection in acculturation research. Mahalingam and Rabelo (2013) also emphasized the need for more of a phenomenological understanding of the lived experiences of immigrants and collaborative component that would allow immigrants to have an opportunity to talk about themselves authentically.

## **Conclusion**

The process of acculturation process is defined, conceptualized, and explained through various approaches by its psychological and sociocultural outcomes and the influence of various variables on acculturation and adaptation relationships. A broad range of people including migrants, minority or ethnic majority groups, immigrants, sojourns, refugees, and native people experience acculturation process through intercultural contact (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). In this process, not only cultural but also psychological change is experienced (Berry, 2003). Although cultural changes affect the customs of groups, psychological changes affect cultural identities and individuals' responses to the acculturation process (Phinney, 2003).

Even though there has been an interest in studying acculturation and immigration, the focus has been mostly on acculturation but less on the changes in identity and how the immigrants navigate this process (Josselson & Harway, 2012). Therefore, in this current study, besides acculturation experiences, the intersectionality of multiple identities of Syrian Muslim refugee women are explored. The following sections review the literature on the models of multiple identities and intersectionality theory.

## **Multiple Identities**

People often have various contradictory psychosocial identities in terms of their gender, race, ethnicity, or nationality in our growing world that is becoming more and more complicated. The multiplicity of identities determine not only how people perceive themselves but also how they are perceived in their environment by others (Josselson & Harway, 2012). Migration and the possibilities to move around the world have caused many people to interact with a variety of collective identities and therefore reconstruct their sense of belonging. Depending on the social relationships and environment, individuals might determine what aspects of their identities to use. In societies categories emerge to make meaning of these identities in a collective way (Josselson & Harway, 2012).

## **Towards Multiplicity of Identity**

Multiple identity concept is most of the time discussed in connection with Erikson's notion of ego-identity (Erikson, 1968) and regarding the question of whether having multiple identities is a steady and/or preferable situation (Schachter, 2013). According to Erikson, identity formation is a "lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and to his society" (Erikson, 1980, p. 122). It is a unifying process aiming for coherence in multiple, shattered childhood identifications that develop as a result of relationships and interactions with significant others such as parents, teachers, etc. Erikson considered these multiplicities of identifications as the pathways for the formation of future self instead of the identity itself. "Identity formation begins where the usefulness of multiple identifications ends. It arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications and their absorption in a new

configuration” (Erikson, 1980, p. 122). In his concept of identity, Erikson pointed out to the role of society and related the individual to the social world that he wants to be recognized. Identity is not only the meaning that an individual gives to himself, but also understanding of where he places himself in his relationships within the society. In that sense, there are both cognitive and emotional levels of interdependence. Erikson’s work was significant in the way he emphasizes the complexity of the identity concept. What he suggested was some sort of an organization and configuration of multiple identifications towards a coherent organized identity (Schachter, 2013). However, his view of transforming, rejecting, or modifying multiple childhood identifications in order to reach a “unique and reasonably coherent whole” self suggested a singular path to identity which has been challenged and criticized by postmodern theorists. One of the critiques of the Eriksonian view argued that there are multiple dynamic, evolving contexts in which individuals behave. In each context individuals might use or construct different identities (Schachter, 2013).

Leading psychologists such as Freud, Janet, and William James became interested in multiple self-theories of personality, the way people shift among different “selves”, or states of mind, in early 19th and late 20th century (Gregg, 2012). In id-ego-superego theory, Freud (1923/1960) described confrontation of people within their multiple autonomous parts. In their work on hysteria, Breuer and Freud (1957) mentioned “dual consciousness” and “two states of consciousness” observed in their patients. Similar notions were observed by Pierre Janet (1924) in his work on religion and separated parts of the personality. In theorizing multiplicity of self, William James (1981) suggested that self-conception of a person is determined by what he believes about how others view

him. “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind” (p. 281). This idea was taken to another direction by Gergen (1968) who suggested a reconstruction of identity towards a theory of multiple selves. He argued that having a unified and coherent identity is imposed and fostered in traditional communities in order to support consistent and reliable behaviors and therefore, to encourage healthy social structures and preserved identities. However, today, in a postmodern world it is considered to be a means for social regulation which is not only psychologically but also ethically problematic:

The postmodern sensibility questions the concept of “true” or “basic” self, and the concomitant need for personal coherence or consistency. Why the postmodern asks, must one be bound by any traditional marker of identity – profession, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on?” (Gergen, 1991, p. 178).

In his criticism of Gergen and other postmodernists, McAdams (2001) suggested a life story model of identity (1985, 1993, and 1996). According to McAdams, people construct a variety of evolving integrative self-stories in order to become a whole and provide a purpose for their lives.

Identity is not synonymous with the “self” or the “self-concept” or even with “who I am”; rather, it refers to a particular quality or flavoring of people’s self-understandings, a way in which the self can be arranged or configured. (p. 102)

Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on polyphonic novel (multivoicedness and multiplicity of characters and their dialogical relationship), more contemporary identity theorists (Bruner, 1990; Hermans & Kempen, 1991; Herman, 2001; Raggatt, 2006) developed the dialogical self-theory that perceived “self and culture as a multiplicity of

positions” (Herman, 2001) with potential dialogical relationships. The self is the combination of various “I” positions in connection with the other (Josselson & Harway, 2012).

Another group of theories was developed to understand identity development of people with primary group membership. Among those, William Cross (1971) pioneered Black racial identity development theory with Nigrescence theory describing various ideologies of Black identity (cited in Vandiver, Cross, Worrell, & Fhagen-Smith, 2002). Homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1979; Henken, & O’Dowd, 1977) and sexual identity development (Coleman, 1982) theories were proposed to describe the identity development of lesbian and gay individuals. White identity development as proposed by Janet Helms (1990) intended to describe how “Whites can identify (or not identify) with other Whites and/or evolve or avoid evolving a nonoppressive White identity” (p. 5). In terms of ethnic and racial identity theories, the earliest Asian-American identity development model was suggested by Sue Stanley and Derald W. Sue (1971). This approach was later developed by Kim (1981, 2012) who proposed a five-stage Asian American Identity Development Model approach integrating the effect of the external social environment on the identity formation process. Atkinson, Morten, and Sue’s (1983) Minority Identity Development (MID) model and Sue and Sue’s (1990) Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model were two recognized racial and ethnic identity models that attempted to describe how individuals make meaning of their racial or ethnic identities in comparison with the dominant culture (White culture).

Even though these models were crucial in providing concepts of identity development for people with certain group identities, they failed to address and integrate

more heterogeneous racial and ethnic identities (Josselson & Harway, 2012; Phinney, 1993; Poston, 1990; Wijeyesinghe, 1992). In her pioneering work on ethnic identity formation, Phinney (2003) pointed out the dynamic nature of identity and suggested:

Identity is subject to change along various dimensions : over time or across generations in a new culture, in different contexts, and with age or development. Of these changes, those that occur over time in a new culture can be thought of as changes related to acculturation. (p. 63)

### **Models for Multiple Identities**

Complexities of identity development for individuals with multiple identities have been recognized by the development of biracial identity development models. The first model of the multiracial identity, the Marginal Person model, developed by Stonequist (1937) suggested that people with “mixed race” would develop “marginal” identities. Challenging the deficit approach proposed by Stonequist (1937), Poston (1990) formulated a new and positive model that suggested a developmental process of biracial identity formation. The five stages of the developmental process were personal identity (sense of self is independent of a person’s (typically young) ethnic background); choice of group characterization (choice of one ethnic group depending on the various factors); enmeshment/denial (feeling guilty or confused about choosing an identity that does not express the self); appreciation (having more information about ethnic and racial heritage identities); and integration (recognizing and accepting one’s multiple identities and wholeness). The assumption of marginal identity has been further questioned by the development of biracial identity models that addressed the biracial and multiracial individuals’ multiple healthy identity outcomes (del Prado & Lyda, 2009; Root, 1996;

Renn, 2004; Zack, 2006). Contrary to the monoethnic or monoracial identity models, biracial identity models viewed identity formation as a nonlinear and fluid process. Root (1996) suggested that individuals make sense of this process through one of the following “border crossings”:

- (a) having “both feet in both groups” (p. xxi, italics in original) or being able to hold and merge multiple perspectives simultaneously;
- (b) situational ethnicity and race, or consciously shifting racial foreground and background in different settings;
- (c) a decision to sit on the border, claiming a multiracial central reference point; and
- (d) creating a home base in one identity and making forays into others (Renn, 2003, p. 384).

An extension of Root’s (1996) model was developed by Reynolds and Pope (1991) as the “Multidimensional Identity Model” (MIM). This highly acknowledged multiple identities model mainly focused on the multiple oppressed identities rather than the identities as a whole (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Reynolds and Pope’s (1991) MIM proposed four possible identity resolutions to explain the identity resolution options for individuals with multiple oppressed identities. MIM’s first and second identity resolution is called identity with one aspect of self. These two resolutions suggest that some people might prefer to be identified by only one feature of their identity that is determined either by the influence of their society, community, and family (first resolution) or by making a conscious choice on how to identify themselves (second resolution). This may result in repression of one aspect of their identities in order to be accepted in their family or social environment. The third resolution is to identify with multiple aspects of self in a segmented fashion which, might cause a “one-dimensional, incomplete, and segmented

self' (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 179). Finally, the fourth option suggests identifying with combined aspects of self by recognizing and integrating the intersections of multiple identities. Four resolution options in this model promote positive self-esteem and pride. The dynamic and fluid nature of the multidimensional identity development process allows individuals to move among these resolutions depending on their needs, reference groups, or environment (Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

In the area of multiple identities, this model offers a new dimension by discussing the issues of multiple oppressions and their influence on the process of identity development. It is a pertinent model for Syrian refugee women identity development during their acculturation process since these refugees experience discrimination because of their gender, cultural differences, and also their refugee status (Kira, Smith, Lewandowski, & Templin, 2010). Women refugees are considered more vulnerable and liable to experience gender-based violence in a war zone, which distracts the attention from their actual experiences and results in their further marginalization and oppression (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, & Moussa, 2008).

The authors of the MIM model acknowledge the need to surpass existing frameworks and challenge ourselves further in the way we understand our world (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). The emerging concept of intersectionality is one way proposed by Cole (2009) to further investigate the multiplicity of identities. Therefore, intersectionality informs this study in exploring the joint impact (Cole, 2009) of multiple oppressions and multiple (Syrian, Muslim, women, and refugee) identities of Syrian Muslim refugee women on their acculturation processes in the U.S.

## **Intersectionality**

“‘Intersectionality’ refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of differences in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). When originated by Kimberley Crenshaw, the legal scholar and critical race theorist, the term was used to acknowledge experiences of women of color influenced by the interaction of both gender and race, which was lacking in the feminism or antiracism discourses (Crenshaw, 1991). During the same time, the limitations of studies that consider race or gender as the identity or disadvantage category were emphasized by some other scholars (e.g., Collins, 1990; Hurtado, 1989; Smith & Stewart, 1983). Since then, the concept of intersectionality has been the most notable contribution of women’s studies together with related studies (McCall, 2005).

In her pioneering work on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) pointed out the dominant conceptions of discrimination that make us consider subordination as a disadvantage happening in a “single categorical axis”. She further discussed that the “single axis” approach focused only on the experiences of the privileged members of the group, marginalizing the multiply-disadvantaged. The intersectionality approach revealed the way “single-axis” reasoning eroded legal thinking and disciplinary knowledge production, and a fight for social justice (Crenshaw, 1989). Defining intersectional identities in relation to each other is an essential assumption that every theoretical formulation of intersectionality embraces (Shields, 2008). Contrary to the way social identities are conceptualized by their additive and independent functioning, formulation of intersectionality posits that experiences emerge as a result of the interaction among

social identities (race, gender, and class) and their relation to each other (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill 1996; Warner, 2008).

Dill and Zambrana (2009) also underlined that race, class, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, sexuality, religion, or nationality do not impact or define individual and group identity alone. They recognize the combined influence of all these characteristics on group and individual, but also point out: “In a hierarchically organized society, some statuses are more valued than others. Within groups, there is far greater diversity than appears when, for analytical purposes people are classified with a single term” (p. 6). Therefore, the way these social identities intersect has a great influence on those individuals who identify themselves with those categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Social marginality research points out the power dynamics in different social identities and suggests that those differentials influence the identity formation process of marginalized social groups (Mahalingam, Balan, & Haritatos, 2008). Thus, analyses of these identity categories separately would be inadequate to understand the experiences of individuals with multiple disadvantaged statuses as these categories are experienced all at once (Cole, 2009).

Over the decades, the concept of intersectionality proved itself to be significant not only in feminist studies, queer studies, and legal studies but also in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). The intersectionality framework is also suggested to guide the research questions in immigration studies (Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2013). In this context, race, class, gender, and sexuality are considered to be the components of a social and cultural matrix (Mahalingam, 2007). According to Mahalingam (2007) intersectionality is “a

triangulation of a subject vis-à-vis his or her social location and social positioning along with race, class, gender, and caste. This process is dynamic, multidimensional and historically contingent” (p. 43).

A recent qualitative study (Jones, 2017) conducted to investigate the racialized experiences of Arab descended students provided an example of social positioning by examining the participants’ out-group and in-group social positions in a variety of settings. The findings derived from the in-depth interviews and observational field notes indicated the racial micro aggressions that students experienced in their classrooms, student life, and where they live. Additionally, students mentioned marginalized positions within other Arab groups who were born in America, or who have different religious affiliations. The findings also emphasized the influence of organizational power on students’ identities when they are involved in organizations that are considered controversial by the majority. They mentioned being challenged in reserving spaces, reaching out to people and being required to have security for such organizations. These experiences suggest intersectional social categories and social power dynamics and historicity of racialization towards Arabs (Jones, 2017).

Mahalingam, Hajski, and Sanders (cited in Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2013) suggest three ways of embracing an intersectionality perspective. One way is focusing on the way combination of all the social identities influence the experiences of immigrants simultaneously such that being a woman or man and an ethnic immigrant would shape the gender role expectations differently (e.g. Nghe, Mahalik, & Lowe, 2003). The second way is by emphasizing the way intersecting contexts influence experiences of social identities. Thirdly, by using the immigrants’ awareness of how their multiple identities

intersect, the advantages and disadvantages of these identities as a personal difference variable (Mahalingam & Rabelo, 2013).

These proposed directions to embrace an intersectionality framework provide an outline that informs this study in my effort to investigate how intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status inform acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. Intersectionality perspective allows analyses of the interaction between variety of differences such as race, gender, or other categories in the lives of individuals, in social and institutional domains and practices (Davis, 2008). Intersectionality specifically refers to the consequences of these interactions with regard to power (Davis, 2008). Syrian Muslim refugee women may have various experiences of power relations because of their gender, nationality, religion, migration status, and the interaction of these multiple positioning in their daily life. Therefore, using an intersectionality lens is relevant to this study in terms of analyzing the power dimension of the outcomes of these interactions as well.

### III. METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the research methods that I used to address the research questions presented in Chapter I and below.

- What are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.?
- How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

The following sections include the researcher's role, study setting and participants, data collection methods, building trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. In order to gain a better understanding of the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women and intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status, I employed a qualitative research methodology using narrative inquiry.

Qualitative research aims “to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative data position the researcher in the context where the researcher can feel and understand what it means to have been in that experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Patton, 2002). “Qualitative data tell a story” (Patton, 2002, p. 47) and it is through stories that cultural and social meanings become apparent. “In narratives, our voices echo those of others in the sociocultural world, and we evidence cultural membership both through our ways of crafting stories and through the very content of these stories” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2).

Since stories are analyzed in the form of “text” as the data set in narrative inquiry, hermeneutics is considered to be the informing philosophic perspective for this method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). With its emphasis on interpretation, hermeneutics philosophy

originated the study of the written text. In a narrative inquiry approach, narrative text is formed by the first-person accounts of experience. As Patton (2002) points out, narrative inquiry

...honors people's stories as data that can stand on their own as pure description of experience, worthy as narrative documentary of experience (the core phenomenology) or analyzed for connections between the psychological, sociological, cultural, political, and dramatic dimensions of human experience. (p.116)

Its focus is "the way humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry was the ideal method to explore acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women since it also provided an opportunity for the marginalized voices to be heard. It also presents counter-narratives against stereotypes about marginalized people (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). Acculturation is a mutual process that involves individuals or cultural groups bringing their cultural and psychological background into a dominant society which also has such qualities (Berry, 2003). In this process following the culture contact, both dominant and non-dominant cultural groups experience change. In order to grasp the depth and thoroughness of experiences, study participants' first-person self-reports were used as the data (Polkinghorne, 2005). Narrative analyses aimed to respond to the following foundational questions: "What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it?" (Patton, 2002, p. 115).

## **The Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered to be the primary data collection and data analysis instrument (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

During the entire qualitative research process, the researcher aims to learn the meaning that participants hold about the issue by collecting the data through document analysis, observation, or interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2014).

In the narrative inquiry, the researcher's role is first to become a listener to the participants' story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). However, it does not mean that the researcher is silenced. Narrative inquiry is a process of mutual storytelling and restorying. In this process, the researcher's role is to construct a relationship in which both parties can be heard. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) point out the researcher's role as a learner in narrative inquiry:

Researched and the researcher are seen to exist in time and in a particular context. They bring with them a history and worldview. They are not static but dynamic, and growth and learning are part of the research process. Both researcher and researched will learn. (p. 14)

In this study, besides my role as a qualitative researcher, making meanings of others' experiences based on the collected data, my knowledge, theoretical positioning, and experiences, I assumed the role of the researcher as a learner as well (Glesne, 1999). Just like many other Turkish citizens, I have been proud of my home country's response to the Syrian civil war in terms of its humanitarian approach. However, I have witnessed the dreadful consequences of the war next door with the massive Syrian influx in Turkey. There have been problems stemming from the demographic changes. Besides that, rising

polarization especially in the host communities and the inhuman living conditions of Syrian refugee women and children living out of refugee camps evoke my interest in how the refugee resettlement process is managed in the U.S., a country made up of immigrants itself. I conducted independent studies to learn about the refugee resettlement programs during my coursework. My interaction with women refugees in those studies motivated me to learn more about their stories and perspectives of those experiences. That is why in this study as a researcher I also had a learner hat as I listened to the stories of the study participants.

### **Participants**

The participants in this research were six Syrian, Arab, Muslim refugee women who came to the U.S. after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. The participants were over 18 years old. According to Patton (2002), “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” p. 245). Therefore, a small number of purposefully sampled (Patton, 2002) participants were selected on a volunteer basis through snowball sampling technique.

Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as a selection of information-rich cases that have insights and in-depth understanding of the questions guiding the study. As one type of purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002), snowball sampling refers to the approach for locating a couple of key participants who can refer you to others that meet the same participant criteria (Merriam, 2009). Having conducted two independent

studies on refugee resettlement and refugee perspectives, I have built a network of people who helped me find interested participants meeting the selection criteria.

### **Data Collection and Management**

Data were collected using narrative inquiry method and qualitative methodology. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) “field notes of the shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, others’ observations, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical writing and documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies” (p. 5) can be used as data for narrative inquiry.

Interviewing was one of the data collection methods that were used in this study. It is considered the most commonly used data collection method in qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, I conducted only one semi-structured interview with each participant. I was planning to schedule the second interview if I needed to clarify or follow up something on the responses from the participants’ first interview, but it was not necessary as the data from the first interview were saturated. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. During the interviews, the participants were asked to talk about their lived experiences in the U.S. and the way their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influenced these experiences. The interviews were audio-recorded, and I took notes as well. All the participants agreed to have the interview audio recorded. The participants were informed about the step by step procedure, the duration of the interview in the consent document before they agreed to participate in the study. The location and time of each interview were determined by the participant at their convenience where they felt comfortable and that their confidentiality

was protected. Five of the participants invited me to their house. Only one of the participants preferred to meet outside in public. Lastly, I interviewed the interpreter of the study, Fatima as I wanted to know what experience about the population and context she was bringing to her interpreting.

Field notes were another source of data that I collected in this study. Field notes included my reflections and observations on the research process while in the field. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that observations can be used as reference points for interviews and triangulation of findings as they give information about the context, incidents, or behaviors. Finally, I used a researcher's journal to log date, time, duration, and description of settings and places of interviews, my impressions, extended observations and reflections after the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data analysis was an ongoing process in this study starting from the data collection phase in order to avoid “unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 197). Since field notes comprise the ideas, insights that are written about the data by the researcher in the field, during the data collection phase, they can be considered as the start of the data analysis process (Patton, 2002).

Narrative inquiry was used as a method of analysis in this study. As Riessman (2008) suggested narrative analysis refers to “a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (p.11). Common elements of the narrative analysis found in these methods are collecting personal stories in the form of texts through data collection methods such as interviews, or field notes, rewriting the stories into a

chronological sequence, and integrating the setting of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, I used the data analysis steps proposed by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). These steps are as follows: 1) get to know the data, 2) focus the analysis, 3) categorize the information, 4) identify patterns and connections within and between categories, and 5) interpret the data to bring it all together. Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) emphasize the importance of understanding the data to achieve good quality in the analysis. In order to gain a thorough understanding of the data, they suggest reading and re-reading the transcript, and field notes, listening to the recordings and writing down the insights and impressions you have as you do that. Secondly, they suggest focusing the analysis by reviewing the aim of the analysis and the key questions to respond. After I transcribed the interviews, I listened to the recordings and read the transcripts a couple of times. I also read my field notes and journal for each interview. As I read the transcripts, I categorized the information under themes and identified the patterns across the data. I then identified the subthemes and focused the analysis using Clandinin and Connelly (2000)'s Three-Dimensional Narrative Space approach and reviewed the responses relative to the interview questions (Appendix B). The following questions were some of the typical interview questions that were asked to the participants: 1. How would you describe your experiences when you first came to the United States? 2. Describe your experiences with the first Americans you met in the United States. 3. Could you describe your life in Syria before coming to the United States? 4. How would you describe your present experiences in the U.S.? The interview questions (Appendix B) represented the topic area. Therefore, not all of them were the exact questions asked to the participants.

The Three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation (place). Clandinin (2006) describes the narrative research process as working within these three-dimensional spaces while collecting the data and mounting the pieces of research together. In the three-dimensional space approach, the transcript or text is analyzed for both the participant's personal experiences and for the social *interactions*. "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relations, always in a social context" (p. 2). *Continuity* is another principal dimension. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest "Experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p. 2). Therefore, the transcript or text is analyzed for past experiences, as well as for present experiences that are shown in actions or events, and for implied or possible future experiences. Lastly, the data are analyzed looking at the *situation/context* in the participant's landscape which involves specific places or the sequence of the storyteller's places (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Focusing the analysis on three dimensions (interaction, continuity, and situation) helped me identify the patterns and connections in and between categories and restorying the participants' narratives.

Working within the three-dimensional space emphasizes the relational dimension of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006). Clandinin (2006) suggests that "narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process" (p. 47). As an expatriate coming from a neighboring country hosting millions of Syrian citizens, I believe my experiences

contributed in all three dimensions (interaction: personal and social; continuity: past, present, and future; and situation: place) to the stories of Syrian women in this study. Having grown up in a very close city to the Syrian border, I have always been familiar with the Syrian culture, the socio cultural and geographical similarities our countries have. Recently, after the break of war in Syria, I have also witnessed the severity and mercilessness of war and how it has influenced millions of lives. While I have had the heartfelt worries about those who could survive the war and sheltered in my country, from my interactions with the Syrian refugees living in my country, I understand that the cultural similarities we share have been the biggest privilege for Syrian refugees in Turkey compared to those in other countries. By engaging with participants through attending to their stories with this perspective, I could walk into the midst of their stories and inquiry into their experiences.

Finally, I interpreted the data in light of the research questions and the conceptual framework that I used in this study. Makris (2017) describes narrative inquiry as a supplementary research method to intersectionality approach and suggests that “intersectionality makes the call for a less contrived representation of people, while narrative inquiry represents a quest for a less contrived representation of reality. They are natural companions” (p. 78). Therefore, in my interpretation of the data, I used the acculturation theory with an intersectionality lens, focusing on the interaction and simultaneous effects of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status while identifying the patterns and categories through narrative inquiry methods.

## **Participants' Confidentiality**

Disclosure of comprehensive findings and protection of participants from harm are the types of ethical considerations that should be assured during the data analysis and representation process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Josselson, 2007). In order to protect participants, it is recommended to mask participant names at the very beginning and prevent exposure of any identifying information in the data analysis documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Josselson (2007) points out, if participants do not trust that we will assure their anonymity, they do not tell us their stories. Therefore, in this study, I ensured the confidentiality and privacy of the participants by giving them pseudonyms as soon as the data collection process started. For the same reason, the consent form signature was waived.

In narrative research, there is a higher possibility that participants will feel more exposed and vulnerable by the presented work than in other qualitative research because of the relatively longer stories published from individuals' narratives (Chase, 2011). When the refugee status, gender, and religious background of the study participants are considered, it is predictable that some participants might worry about being identified when they share the stories of their life. In her discussion of ethical considerations in narrative research, Josselson (2007) suggests researchers embrace an "ethical attitude" for each research setting instead of informing the participants about a list of rules concerning their ethical practice (cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Maintaining an ethical attitude throughout the study, I informed the participants about the confidentiality and privacy of their stories, protection of their identities and the research material. I had the waiver of signed informed consent in order to reduce the risk

of confidentiality and to further protect the participant identity. Each participant was provided with a consent document which described the purpose and procedures of the study in detail. They were not asked to sign or write their names or any other personal information on this document. The consent document comprised information on the risks, benefits, extent of confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation as well. The participants were also provided with the consent document in their native language, Arabic. The consent document was reviewed with the participant. The participants were provided with a copy of the document. I also explained to participants that I would use audio recorders to record their interview. They had the option to ask me to turn the recorder off if they were uncomfortable with it. My field notes, journal, audio recorders, and transcripts of the interviews were stored on an external hard drive which was protected with a password in a locked drawer in my home office.

### **Building Trustworthiness**

To establish trustworthiness in this study, I employed Lincoln & Guba's (1985) strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), credibility could be accomplished by the use of various data collection and analysis methods (triangulation of data), prolonged engagement and member checks. In this study, the data were collected through interviews, field notes, and the researcher's journal. Patton (2002) also suggests the use of multiple methods for data collection and analysis to test for consistency. Member checking was another strategy used to increase credibility. In the narrative inquiry, the researcher is in continuous collaboration with the participant to confirm the story and negotiate the interpretations (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Therefore, I ensured the credibility of the findings

through collaboration and engagement with participants. During the restorying phase, I checked the interpretations with the participants. As a narrative researcher, I acknowledge that lived and told stories are reflections of participants' identities, their now and future, and they embrace these stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). Therefore, I made sure to negotiate the transcripts and honor the narrative authority of the participants and present their stories in a respectful manner (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In terms of transferability of findings, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the findings should be applicable in similar contexts. In this study, I provided rich and detailed data that can be transferred or adapted to other refugee communities.

Lastly, to ensure the dependability and confirmability, I examined the data and findings thoroughly in each step of the research process and when the text was finalized. Additionally, I depended on the reviews of my dissertation chair.

#### IV. THE STORIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

*“You are like a plant, and God will put you somewhere, even in the desert*

*you will get flowers.”- Aysha*

In this chapter, I introduce the six study participants and their experiences of resettlement and transition to the U.S. I also include the perspective of the interpreter of the interviews. The primary purpose of this study is to explore the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. to understand better how the intersection of their national, religious, gender, and refugee identities influence their transition process and lives. This chapter addresses the research questions: What are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.? How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

All the participants experienced the trauma of war. Loss; fear of the unknown; cultural differences; changes in gender roles; language barriers; and perceived and experienced discrimination towards their intersecting national, religious, and refugee identities have been central to their experiences. Participants’ experiences with their multiple intersecting identities seem to have affected their preferences in how to and with whom to interact in the U.S.

##### **Zainab**

Zainab is a 42 years old housewife from Deer-zur. She is married with three daughters and three sons. She resettled in the U.S. with her husband and five of their children in 2016. One of her sons preferred to stay in Syria. I would define Zainab as a motherly woman. She is a very friendly, cheerful, and open-hearted person. I felt like I

had known Zainab for a long time as soon as we started to talk. I could connect with her easily. I thought that was because she lived for two years in my college city in Turkey and she could speak some Turkish.

Zainab preferred to meet me at her apartment. It was a sweltering day in June. The interpreter, Fatima met me at the business center of the apartment complex, and we walked to Zainab's apartment. She welcomed us with her three daughters. The door opened into their tiny living room. The first thing I noticed when we stepped in was the Arabic prayer on the TV and the cool breeze blowing directly on my face from the AC. We all took seats after small talk introducing ourselves. I could cool off only after a bottle of cold water one of her daughters offered. Behind the wall that separated the tiny living room in the middle, I could see the dining area where her daughters hung out for a while during our interview. A plate of Syrian candies and butter shortbread cookies were on the serving table right in front of Fatima and me. As soon as we sat, having caught my eyes staring at the cookies, Zainab offered me, "hadi, buyrun" she said in Turkish meaning "com'on, help yourself." I could feel that she was very excited to host me, someone she could relate to from home. As we settled in, exchanged some words in Turkish, and had our first bites of the cookies, one of her daughters served us tea. Zainab asked her youngest daughter to turn the tv off and said "hazirim" in Turkish which means "I am ready" with a big proud smile on her face, subtly adjusting her blouse and correcting her posture.

Zainab fled the war by moving from one village to another with her children, husband, and relatives. Finally, she reached the city Adana in Turkey with her family. They lived in Adana for three years before resettling in the U.S. Her experience in

Turkey was very positive. She mentioned how hospitable Turkish people were during their stay there. Zainab told us that two of her daughters have an inherited blood disorder. So, both of her girls need to go to hospital often. Due to her daughters' health condition, Zainab's family was chosen immediately by the United Nations when they applied for resettlement to the U.S.

Zainab started to describe the transition in her life with their resettlement in the U.S. For example; she said,

Before we had everything. And, when the war started, we had nothing. [Sighs]  
We went to zero. Praise be to Allah. We were fine when we came since we had an apartment ready. The resettlement agency took the daughters to the hospital. After four days of our arrival, they took the daughters to the hospital. It was fine. Just sometimes the language was a problem.

She later told us that language was the biggest challenge she experienced, “like a very big stone” in front of her. She mentioned using gestures to understand people and smartphone dictionary to translate from Arabic to English. While the first Americans they interacted with as a family were from the Muslim Arab American community, her comments, “I liked it. I liked something first. Most people respect us, and there is a lot of respect between people” indicated that her overall impression of American people and American culture was very positive.

Zainab started almost any sentence with “Alhamdulillah” which means “all praise is due to Allah alone.” When she said,

Compared to what is going on in Syria now, I am very happy. Praise be to Allah, now kids are going to school. The other ones are going to the hospital when they need to. So, I am happy with the environment and everything.

I could feel that for her, their survival from what they went through during the war in Syria was already a miracle and a big reason to be content with her life here. What else could matter in her life now? She noted, “Praise be to Allah. I feel fine. Nobody has stopped me from wearing my hijab. Nobody has stopped me from my prayers or daily things that I do. I have no problem.” During our conversation, I often thought and felt that Zainab could share her genuine feelings openly only in those rare moments when she could distance herself from the shades of the war she survived. In one of those moments, Zainab told us that she and her husband were expecting to have more financial support when they arrived in the U.S. She said they hoped that they would get free food, free housing, a house with furniture and everything in it. But they had to buy everything by themselves and pay the rent from the cash assistance they received. The cash assistance was provided for a couple of months until her husband found a job.

Regarding her new life in the U.S., Zainab said, “I had problems too, adjusting at the beginning. But I pray or read Koran to feel more powerful, or I can handle it.” Zainab had a big extended family with whom she used to share everything back in Syria. She compared her life before the war now. She said,

In Syria, I felt like I had everything. I had three houses, our land. We had an extended family. I felt more powerful than here. When we came here because we lost everything, I feel like I am only living. There you share everything, but here you have to stand up for yourself.

She talked about how difficult it was to stay powerful as a woman and as a refugee in the U.S. As a traditional Middle Eastern mother, Zainab had prepared trousseau and dowry for her daughters' marriages, and even for her youngest son. But they lost all. As a woman coming from a similar cultural background, I could relate to her feelings since I knew for a mother, trousseau and dowry symbolize the culture of a family, their status, the legacy that she would leave for her children's future. Therefore, what she lost is not just the belongings, but the future she has built for her kids as a mother.

In the course of our conversation, I noticed that Zainab was so traumatized by the war that the overarching challenge she coped was her sadness and her disappointment over losing her house and the future she prepared for her kids. When she talked about her son's preference to stay in Syria, Zainab mentioned her cousin's imprisonment by the government and how all her family preferred his death to all the torture that was awaiting him in prison. She was scared that something like that would happen to her son as well. She burst into tears when she said, "They use electricity, they torture people, you know." She wiped her face hastily as if she was shaking off all those disturbing and upsetting thoughts. I told her that I could imagine her fear and concern for her son. Fortunately, Fatima also comforted her with some prayers. Her daughter's entrance to the room offering some more tea also helped us transition to our conversation from those emotional moments. Zainab started to talk about Syrian food and common words we had in Turkish and Arabic. I was observing Zainab and trying to see if she was feeling any better as she talked. She still had tearful eyes, but she was telling me about the Turkish food they had back in Turkey. She kept insisting that I should try some of the candies as

well. When we finished our conversation over food, trying to convince me that she felt better, Zainab asked me if I had more questions.

I asked her about how her experiences as a woman changed in the U.S. regarding gender roles in her family or outside their home. Zainab said that it was new to her to see almost all women drive, wear clothes like miniskirts, and participate in the labor force. She explained her point of view further:

Yes, women here sometimes they have to work. It is good for her to go out and learn. In our country it is different, we are like not much civilized. I encourage my girls. They are working; they are driving. I encourage my girls to do learn, to take trips, to do everything. I am not against it.

Zainab paused and thought a few minutes when I asked her if she could describe the changes in her social behaviors in daily life. She said they used to live far from the hospital in Syria and a male family member had to accompany her when she took her daughters to the hospital since it was not considered appropriate for a woman to be outside of her house unescorted by a male member of her family. On the contrary, here in the U.S., she said she would go to the clinic by herself without her husband.

She discussed that further raising her eyebrows and pointing by her side with her hands, “When we are sitting, people come over. Women were sitting in another, separate places than men at home. Now it is ok. They sit together. Families, men, and women, together.” Because of her bodylanguage, I found myself visualizing Zainab, sitting among men and women in the waiting room at the hospital. A very ordinary scene in our lives was a very defining experience for her since she came from a country where public places were gender segregated. Zainab told us that she mostly spent time at home since

she could not drive. Except for visiting some of her friends, and the doctor's office, she was not doing anything differently than she used to do back in Syria. The only interaction Zainab had with the Americans was at the clinic when she went to the doctor visits for her daughters, and that happened with an interpreter. Specifically, she mentioned a social worker lady she loved to talk at the clinic since she would ask questions about her personal life besides her daughters' health.

Zainab said as a family they only had one American friend, but they would exchange visits with the other Syrian families. Zainab shared her feelings about finding a community with similar religious and ethnic identity. For example; she said,

One of the things that makes me feel good here and feel stable and feel happy, I came and find that there is a lot of people that speak my language. A lot of people like Arabs, Muslims. It doesn't mean from our country but the same community.

I noticed that Zainab seemed more relaxed when we were talking about her friends from the Syrian community. Obviously, it was her comfort zone. When we finished the interview, I left Zainab's house feeling somewhat heartbroken and somewhat hopeful for a better, peaceful, and happy life for her and her family.

### **Maryam**

Maryam is a 37 years old housewife, married with three daughters and three sons. She is from Aleppo. She resettled in the U.S. with her family in 2016. Maryam like Zainab invited Fatima and me to her house for the interview. She was as friendly and welcoming as Zainab, but I didn't feel the same connection I felt for Zainab because Maryam sounded and looked a bit hesitant to share her story with me at first. I had this impression because she mostly had eye contact with Fatima instead of me when I asked

her questions and as Fatima translated. I tried to make her feel comfortable by sharing my background and how close I lived to Aleppo, and knew people before we started to talk about her story. She became more relaxed than the beginning of our conversation as our discussion proceeded.

Maryam lives in a different neighborhood than Zainab, but she is still very close to the Arab community in the city. Her apartment and the apartment complex, in general, looked mostly neglected and old. The first thing I noticed as we walked up the stairs was the American flag hanging outside of her apartment's door. As we entered, I saw the Christmas lights on the ceiling and a dinner table with the American flag patterns on it. The door opened into their living and dining room. It was nearly a hundred degrees outside, but there was not any AC running in her house. Two fans were working at the corners of the living room and a video game on TV, probably left on by her sons. As soon as we exchanged some words, her sons and daughters entered to welcome us. Maryam's older son who had significantly bright eyes exchanged some Turkish words with me. As kids left the room, I was trying to pull myself together and ignore the slight sense of uneasiness that consistently chirping smoke alarm in the apartment left me with since we arrived. Meanwhile, Maryam was fixing a plate of Syrian cookies and lemonade for us from the serving table. I shifted my attention to the very Middle Eastern looking miniature decorations under the tv stand. Maryam told us she brought them from Syria and added, "We couldn't bring much from home. These pieces are some of few we could bring with us."

Once we had our sips from the lemonade Maryam offered, she started to tell us about herself. Maryam and her family moved to Jordan in 2011, at the very beginning of

the war. They lived in Jordan for five years. Maryam described the time of war and their decision to flee from home and resettle in the U.S. She began,

Our life was good. My husband was working, and everything was ok. Because living in your own country is the best. But [Sighs] war traumatized us because we saw many bad things. Blood, and corps like on the floor. It made us more scared. When we were in Jordan, we had a chance to apply to come to the U.S. We could choose to come to the U.S. We filled out the papers with the U.N.

Maryam was speaking very fast. I could tell her anxiety from her gestures and the way she used her hands while she talked. She continued to talk about their resettlement process and that they were afraid of the unknown future waiting for them, specifically for her kids since they hadn't been to school in Jordan. She said, "We were scared at the beginning, how we are going to adjust, how we are going to go. Then we got adjusted. We found out that people are nice, so we felt more secure." She added that life in the U.S. turned out to be easier than what they had expected. She continued, "We were confused at the beginning. We didn't know what to do. Then, little by little, they started to say 'Hi' to us, and that is how it started."

One of the main differences that Maryam's sons observed was the way women dressed and took part in life in the U.S. Maryam told us that she had to explain her kids about those differences and differences in gender roles and American lifestyle. She also described how she changed her "way of dressing." She explained, "I used to wear a long coat, and my husband said it is better to change it to long sleeved blouse and pants. Still covered." I asked her how she felt about this change, and she said,

I didn't want to change at the beginning, but my husband insisted, and kept saying that people would keep looking at me and stuff. So, I changed. I used to have just the long manteaux; I changed it to regular pants.

Maryam indicated that as a family they were happier in the U.S. than in Jordan. She said they appreciated that as refugees they were given opportunities to get an education, work and earn living just like anybody else. She told us that they were content with their life since they had the same chances as citizens born in the U.S. Besides, Maryam said, she could embrace her identities since she was in a community of people with a similar background. She explained further, "Other people look like me, wearing the same things gives more confidence. Wherever I go, I am respected." referring to the other Muslim, Arab citizens living in their neighborhood. But being far from her family, her homeland was still very difficult for her. She expressed her feelings of being in the U.S. apart from her family when she said,

What was good there was I was with my Syrian family. Even my mother died while I was here. I couldn't see her. Here there are some other good things. I felt more powerful. I felt like I can do more things. But at the same time, missing that part of the family. It is like not complete.

Maryam told us that as a woman, she felt more powerful in the U.S. since she could do things relying on herself. There are significant changes in her lifestyle as she has a driver's license and goes out by herself now. She discussed the differences,

I couldn't go out shopping by myself in Jordan or Syria. Now I can do it. I grab one of the kids, and I go shopping in the malls or out. I used to wait for my

husband sometimes for two-three days to get my things because he is busy, or he would be tired. Now anytime I want something I go, drive by myself.

She explained how her roles as a woman changed in the course of their life here:

Now I take the kids to the doctor. Or when they ask them from the school or medical clinic. I like it better. I am relying on myself more. I feel like I have more responsibilities and I am more self-dependent here.

For Maryam, life in the U.S. is empowering, but on the other hand, she feels the challenges of not living in a Muslim country. Even though she never experienced anything against her identities, she described her fears when she said, “Maybe something, somebody, something bad will happen. It is not like being at home. I am scared to encounter somebody who doesn’t like Muslims, or Arabs, or refugees or like foreigners.”

After pausing a few minutes, I asked Maryam if she had an interesting story that she would like to share with us. Maryam giggled for a second and started to tell:

Once we were in a grocery store shopping. We had a lot of bags, and we were walking. A lady, she offered to help us and wanted to give us a ride, and I refused because I was scared. I didn't know her. Hamdi, my older son, he said "what can she do, mum? Is she going to steal us? That is the worst she can do, let's go with her." He encouraged me. We took the ride home.

As she continued laughing, Fatima and I joined her. Maryam like Zainab did not have any interaction with Americans except for when she had to run daily errands. Her central community includes Syrian families and other Muslim Arabs.

## Farah

Farah is a 37 years old Syrian woman. She is a housewife with four children. She arrived in the U.S. in 2016. They were the first Syrian refugee family arrived in the city. I met Farah at her house for the interview just like the two other participants. Farah lives in a small duplex apartment. Her apartment door opened to the small living room which didn't have enough light, but cold air felt good after the hot summer breeze outside. From the way Farah greeted and welcomed us, I could feel that she felt comfortable meeting Fatima and me. As soon as we got in, a constantly chirping smoke detector caught my attention there as well. While Farah was having a small talk with Fatima, I was thinking if this was just a coincidence or Syrian families were ignoring the smoke detector signal, or perhaps they did not know they had to change the batteries. Residential smoke detectors were probably not a requirement in Syria just like they weren't in Turkey. Debating those thoughts, I tried to ignore the chirping smoke detector and settled in. It was a very tiny room furnished with two sofas which felt very comfortable.

Farah left the living room and came back in a few minutes with a plate of cookies. She offered us some Turkish coffee as well. I shortly introduced myself to Farah and told her why I was interested in listening to her story. It was my third interview. After my interview experiences with the two other participants, I felt more prepared to listen to Farah. Farah had a story of courage. She started telling her story from the beginning of the war. As Farah began to speak, I thought how easy it was for an outsider to say "your life here" when asking someone about lived experiences and feelings. "Life here" meant nothing for her without the life she had to leave behind, I thought. Farah started to describe the wartime and how they survived the war. She began,

My husband had a place to sell sweets and cakes with his brothers. So, it was the beginning of the problem in Syria when I went to Jordan for a vacation because I have a married daughter. We had a problem going to Jordan by the border. When I was at the border, they let me go, but they said my son who was 14 had to stay. So, they didn't let him go because he was 14 and they wanted to keep him or go back to the country in case they need him for the military. All I did was, I made "dua" (praying). At the end of the day one soldier told me 'just wait till the soldiers change shift.' The time when they were changing, that one said, 'go take him to the car'.

So, Farah and her husband took their son and ran away to Jordan at the border thanks to that one soldier. In Jordan, Farah and her husband began to worry about the rest of the family in Syria. Farah did not know where her parents were. After having stayed in Jordan for two months, Farah became mentally and physically very sick since she didn't know where her parents were.

She also tried to bring her married daughter who had a newborn baby in Syria. Her daughter and son-in-law lost everything they owned. Their cars exploded. Farah tried helping them by offering money to smugglers for four times to take her to Jordan. However, they failed in each time. "She was about to be kidnapped one time," she told us and added, "She was breastfeeding but had no milk. She had two daughters; two years old and one-month-old. They hid in the bathroom with no food, nothing while snipers were outside." Her daughter was able to make it to the border on the fourth time she tried. While Farah was telling about the war, I felt like I was there with her. She was speaking

in Arabic as Fatima translated, but Farah's body language meant more than what Fatima said. Farah was reliving the war, but this time she was with us. She continued,

I decided with my husband to go back to Syria, go through the bushes and like places where they couldn't see us. I could not stay because I would die from thinking of where they were. All of us on the bus we started to pray "Fatia" (a prayer) like ready to die. Because anybody finds us on the way, they would kill us. If something happens to the bus or us, you know. When we went back, it was very difficult to see. It was a different world. You are in an occupied country. I saw people living on the cardboards, gardens, in the parks, in the streets. There were like fifty-five living people in one apartment. No water, no gas, no electricity, no furniture in our house. Not enough food for everybody. Then my husband also found his family. He hated all he saw, and he wanted to leave.

Farah did not give up on her family. After they came back to Jordan, she tried to help them by sending money, selling her gold and whatever they had in Jordan. More interestingly, she started saving many other lives. She first helped her sister's son to pass the border. Since Farah's son-in-law knew people from the government, everybody wanted to send their kids to her. Farah said that every other week, she received a teenager in their house in Jordan. She continued,

Then I had like fifteen young men in my house. I had a big room. It was very cold that year in Jordan. We had a problem finding comforters for all. And then there was a problem with feeding all these people. I sold all my gold.

While I couldn't help listening to her story with tearful eyes, she had no tears when she was talking about her experiences of war, literally escaping snipers and all the trauma she went through.

I asked Farah about their decision to resettle in the U.S. She nodded her head as if she was about to answer that question anyway. I was too focused on watching Farah talk and listening to Fatima. But at some point, I noticed Fatima could hardly keep up with Farah. Since Farah was telling her story breathless with all her emotions in it, I was about to believe that I could understand Arabic without an interpreter. Farah continued,

We were one of the luckiest people. One day we were walking with my husband and received a call. They said do you want to go to America. My husband thought it was a joke. Because the phone number was private, he said, “yeah, yeah” and he hung up. After one week they called again and said they were from the agency and they said they need 10,000 people. It was the end of Obama period he wanted to bring 10,000 people. They said we had only three months. We had only three months to do everything. They told us to get all the papers together.

Farah told us that her older son was happy about the news of resettlement while she and her husband feared the unknown and uncertainties awaiting before them. As she started to talk about their resettlement to the U.S., Farah's voice got lower and lost its power which I noticed when the constantly chirping smoke detector caught my attention again. I forced myself to ignore the uneasiness that chirping sounds made me feel. Farah had a brittle voice as she continued:

When we came, we were in another area. That complex didn't have anything near. It was more excluded. We had to take the bus to do groceries, stores. I was by myself. I had allergies. There were only one or more Arab families.

Farah told us that the resettlement agency didn't have time for them in their first days in the U.S. Their house was not close to the Arab community nor to the grocery stores or shopping centers. They had to take the bus everywhere by themselves. Since they came during the Ramadan month (When Muslims fast the whole day for a month), it was difficult for them to go around by bus or to go to Eid prayers. She also mentioned that they couldn't get used to the heat and the humidity. She said, "The first three months, it was very hard for us. There were no Syrian or Arab families. I was not feeling good. I cried every day. I wanted to go back to Jordan."

Regarding her interaction with Americans, Farah said she felt like her neighbor was scared of her because of the scarf she wore. Only after her son started to speak English with them and she offered some food, did they begin to get used to them. She added, "Even the guy who was doing the cleaning in the complex, my husband who doesn't speak in English started saying hi to him every day, so he started talking to us."

Farah explained that they moved to their current house after living in their first place for six months. She said it got easier to live in the U.S. by time. Their apartment is now walking distance to the mosque. There are stores and a lot of people around. She couldn't hold her tears when she said, "To be alone and to be stranger is the hardest. One time when we moved here, I went to the mosque, and I prayed to God that he gives me friends, like my sisters, like my family." I got closer to Farah and asked if I could hug her. She nodded her head and hugged me. I told her that she was one of the most

courageous women I met, like a “wonder woman” I said. She laughed with tears in her eyes.

When Farah talked about all the trauma she experienced during the war, how she risked her life to find all her family, lost everything she had and saved all those young people, she sounded powerful. But for her “being a stranger” in a foreign land was as traumatic as the reason she was there. Unlike other participants, Farah told us that she went to the ESL classes. She said, “I am trying to speak English.” She also mentioned how she coped with the othering eyes when she was out in public. She described,

I always initiate a smile. People if you stay far, they don't know you. People look at you with your hijab, and when you smile at them, you give them a reaction that I am not a bad person, here I am smiling to you. For me, the idea is never be shy, never stay excluded, never don't want to have (avoid) an eye contact.

Farah's interaction with Americans was only in those times when she was out in public. She said that sometimes some ladies would come to her and compliment on her scarf. Farah mentioned that she made very good friends from the Arab Muslim community. When she had surgery recently, her house was full of people, full of food for ten days. She didn't even need her husband who was busy working. Her friends took care of her, drove her to the doctor and helped her with everything she needed. When we finished the interview, I thanked Farah for taking me in to her story. She was a true wonder woman for me.

### **Lana**

Lana is a 37 years old, married woman from Aleppo. She has three sons and one daughter. Lana and her family lived in Turkey for two years before they resettled in the

U.S. in 2016. Like all other participants, Lana also wanted to meet me at her place. They lived in a big house and in a lovely neighborhood. When she opened the door, Lana was yelling to her daughter who was responding to her from upstairs. She welcomed us signaling the living room at the end of the hallway. She then turned her attention to us and said in Turkish, “kusura bakmayin, hosgeldiniz” meaning “my apologies, welcome.” Her easygoing manner with her pretty fluent Turkish made me feel like I was talking to a neighbor from Turkey. As we settled in, she exchanged some words with Fatima, and I gazed at the vast living room which was sparsely furnished. Among all the participants Lana was the most outgoing and lively one. She looked like she was still in her 20s. I could feel her sympathy to the Turkish people which she also mentioned during the interview. Lana began her story with how they decided to resettle in the U.S. She said,

People from the U.N. came to our place and registered us. Then they came again, and they gave us the choice; do you want to come to the U.S. or not? We wanted it because my husband has a problem with his leg for health reasons. This process took one year and a half. They usually do orientation, but we didn't have time. Everything took a process and then they called and said, ‘you leave in one month.’ We came to the U.S.

I could feel the discontent from her voice. She continued,

I had a shock when we came because we were coming to America. We were thinking that in America we were going to find everything like complete, everything good. But we had the shock. Not like we were surprised; it was a shock. I wanted to come for my family, but I did not want to come. We were all

shocked when we came. Because when we came, everything is different. I had the idea that people are scared of us. Like Syrians, they are terrorists.

I asked Lana if she experienced anything against her identities. She said, “No, I never had an experience, but I just heard that people thought Syrians are terrorists, they are not welcomed in here because they are from an area where there is ISIS, terrorists.” Lana told us that when they came to the U.S., they needed more support and counseling to adapt. She said, “We needed time to learn how life in the U.S. was, the rules, and everything. It is not easy in the U.S.” For Lana, the most difficult time was the first two months. As a family, they participated in an orientation program for a short time. But they could not complete it. “I got used to by time,” she finished her sentence carelessly.

Lana said part of the reason why she had more difficulties compared to many other women around her was that she could not drive, and she lived far from other people. She told us that she felt secluded from American life as she did not have any relationship with her neighbors. She said people were alone, doing things by themselves. She also complained that her life here was very busy and her husband had to work all the time. Lana continued with an experience she had with her American neighbor when she tried to interact with her. She said,

Once, I have a neighbor. I wanted to say hi to her and shake hands. She left some distance between her and me. I wasn't even wearing a scarf. She was American. I invited her and wanted to shake hands. She was at the entrance on the hallway.

She just distanced herself. I will never forget that. I felt so little and shamed.

I could feel that Lana was upset and angry. She was speaking very fast now. She said,

We always have these feeling that we are not wanted. Even when we went to Jordan, the same thing [Pauses]. Even in Turkey, some people would show that we are not wanted. We came here; people say they do not like Syrians.

Everywhere we go. It is something we did not choose to live. We did not choose to move. Why people keep doing this to us? Like, make us feel that we are not wanted. For our mental feeling, it is not a good feeling.

Lana asked me to write down that it was not their choice to leave, to come to the U.S. She said, "We are also humans, and we want to see our future too. We are not here to just eat and sleep. We want to have a better life, to dream, and progress." She was silent for a couple of minutes. I wanted to take a turn and asked her what her expectations were for the future. Lana said, they wanted to feel safe all the time. They want to see good things and new things. She added, "We suffered enough."

Lana doesn't go to the ESL program. She said she is helping her husband with his job since he has a physical disability. She also mentioned how difficult it was to maintain a life in the U.S. financially when kids have school, and there are rent and utilities to pay. She also complained that they didn't receive enough support when they came to the U.S. Regarding social interaction, she also had only Arab Muslim friends. She said,

In general, life is hard in the U.S and we need to be considered like regular people. Most of the Turkish people were very helpful. The problem here is, there is no similar relationship with Americans, neighbors. I am here far from people, in the house. Then my husband keeps calling me "prepare this, prepare that".

Lana sounded like her husband's position restricted her life. She excused herself from doing many things she could have done to be involved in the community. She also

indicated that her husband did not want her to learn English and socialize outside their home.

When I asked her about how life in the U.S. changed her roles or behaviors as a woman, she described some of the most significant differences in her lifestyle. She began,

At this age, you can go to school in America but Syria. I am 37. In the United States, you can go to school at any age. In our country, it is inappropriate (ayip). Number two, there you cannot go out. It is like going out is very restricted. Here you can go out.

Lana said that she liked it here because she could do more things by herself. She stopped for a few minutes as if she was debating what she wanted to say next. She continued, “I do not have any problem here. Even, once I get a license, I can go out by myself. My friends can pick me up. [Paused] I don’t want you to take a bad idea about Syria.” I told her that I knew about her culture since we were from neighbor countries and there was not any good or bad. Those differences were what made each of us, our cultures unique in various ways. She nodded confirming what I said and added, “Yes, I feel powerful about who I am. Lana added, “over there; there is family too.” Lana insisted to have us for dinner and stay after the interview. I could feel that she was happy to have her voice heard. She thanked me for the interview, and I made her sure that I would share her concerns and experiences.

### **Aysha**

Aysha is a 21 years old woman from Damascus. She came to the U.S. in 2016 with her parents and siblings. She is the oldest of her two sisters and one brother. Her

nineteen-year-old sister has just graduated from high school. Her father works, but her mother is a housewife. Neither of her parents speaks English fluently. Aysha and her family went to Egypt in 2011 when the war started in Syria. They applied the UN for resettlement to the U.S. in 2014.

Aysha was the only participant who wanted to meet outside, in public. We decided to meet at a restaurant because lunch time was the only time, she was available. It was challenging to schedule our meeting with Aysha. I had been in contact with her for three months. However, she postponed and rescheduled our meetings many times. The last time we scheduled she frankly told me that she was feeling emotionally and psychologically depressed because of many things going on in her life. So, we postponed our meeting again. I did not want to give up on her because her background was different than other participants. She was an educated, English speaking woman. I was interested in hearing her story and how much her experiences differed from the other women I met.

Finally, we met in a Mediterranean restaurant. Aysha was on time for the meeting. It was not a crowded restaurant. There were only us and two other people in a very spacey dining area. The only thing that made me hesitant about the place was the loud music. I asked her if she was comfortable with it. She said it was ok. She looked a little bit shy and stressed when she came. But I think, the ambiance of the place, the music, and talking about the food helped me break the ice. After I introduced her my research and myself, I told her that she could share her story with me as much as she wanted to share. Our conversation started with my background. I mentioned her how I decided to come to the U.S. for a doctoral degree with my family. I told her about my experience of

being a mother of a three-year-old and working as a doctoral research assistant. Once I finished, she said she would love to contribute, and added,

I wouldn't like to share anything from Syria. You can ask me about Egypt, about here. But about Syria, I don't want. It has been a very bad story. It has been about seven years. I am still trying to recover from it.

I respected that and told her that I would love to hear about her life in the U.S.

Aysha has been working for ten months in two jobs. She also studies engineering at a community college which allows her to transfer to a business school at a university after two years of study. Aysha continued,

I am interested to go to college because Inshallah (hopefully) when I get married and have kids. I don't want to raise my kids in the U.S. I want to raise them in an Arabic country. I do not want them to lose the language or lose their culture. Even though they are born in America, they become American; they are still Arabic, they are still Syria. And if I get to college, the same school they have it in Qatar. I can transfer to that country.

I told Aysha that it was a well-thought plan. She said, "I will see how the life goes" and described how she hoped for the best and tried to be positive. She shared a saying they used in her country, "You are like a plant, and God will put you somewhere, even in the desert you will get flowers."

I asked Aysha if she could tell me about her first experiences when she arrived in the U.S. She said, "English and a culture shock. I don't know if you heard about Egypt, they are open 24 hours seven days a week. Here everything closes." She mentioned her uncle who had been living in the U.S. for 48 years was the first person who discouraged

and shocked her. Her uncle told Aysha that she wouldn't be able to study in the U.S. if she kept wearing her scarf. She couldn't believe he told her that. She said she also knew some Muslim women in the U.S. who were trying not to go outside because of the hijab they wear and the discrimination they believed they would encounter if they went out. I asked Aysha about her experiences of being a woman with hijab. She thought for a few minutes and then said, "well to find a job is hard. To find a job with hijab is harder. During the interviews. I got interviews seven times, and I didn't get accepted. It puts on more target." She continued with an incident she experienced at work:

One of the clients called me "why don't you go back to your country?" Because I do not belong here. And here is not a place to stay in it. I didn't answer anything. I just started crying. That time I just started work; it was like my third week. And they were training. I didn't know how to answer that. What should I tell that person? I should like, do I quit? Do I get fired? I didn't think of about his word at all. I thought about my future, and I finally got it after a long journey of. My coworkers told my supervisor, and she told what happened exactly, and I started crying. My supervisor gets downstairs his office is upstairs. He gets down, and he started to answer this person and banned him to become a member from all the associated centers with ours in the city. He said it was a discrimination and that the rules were the same in all locations and he banned him from all other centers in the city.

Aysha said that the support she received from her supervisor and colleagues in this incident was empowering. She said if that happened again, she would have a stronger

voice. With a very determinant voice, she added, “nobody had a right to tell me to go back to my country because it is immigration land.” She continued furiously,

Once you start working, and you pay your bills. I don't accept anyone to call newcomers. I don't like to be called refugees because I am paying everything. The only time I accepted people to call me refugees is when they pay it for me. Other than that, I am the same as you. I am paying the same as you.

Aysha's role in her family changed since they arrived in the U.S. She told us that she was the first contact person for her family members. People would call her about her siblings at school. Her parents need her to take care of anything that happens outside of their house since she is the only fluent English speaker at home. She also mentioned the financial difficulties they experienced as a family and the pressure she feels to meet her family's needs. She began,

Life here is so hard. My dad, my sister, and I work. It is so hard to afford a life; it is expensive. We are a family of six people — life expenses; utilities, rent, so expensive. So, our people heard about the American dream. America is a dream for all the people living abroad. But when you get here, it is not a dream. It is the same; life is harder than back home. When you tell people, they don't understand. They think you don't want them to come here and enjoy life. Especially when you have a family, six people, you have to start over and over and over. We started over three times in our life. And the hardest one was here in the U.S.

I could feel that Aysha was a little bit upset but no more nervous or shy. She was comfortable talking to me.

Having mixed her bowl of salad, she looked like she was about to say something. She took a couple of minutes. Then, started to talk again. She told us that she couldn't get used to the food in the U.S. since she doesn't eat pork or pork products. She also said, "For example, it is so risky to get ice cream. Because there is alcohol in it." said with an excited voice as if that was something nobody knew or paid attention. I told her that I didn't know ice cream would have alcohol in it. We talked about ice cream brands, Mexican food, Mediterranean food, and our preference for grocery stores. I asked Aysha if she spent time with a community or friends. She said,

There are a few families, around 20 families. There are people in other States as well. We have no friends of my age. All the girls are in high school. There are some boys, but they refuse to learn the language. They only work because they have to afford for their families.

Aysha's life has been more about taking care of her responsibilities at school, at work, and home. She is a very mature, strong young woman who bears much responsibility for her family and their life in the U.S. She summarized her feelings and the decision to come to the U.S. in these words,

It took me a lot of tears, took me a lot of things. Also, it is good not to show your weakness. If I didn't come here, I would already have my kids now. I had some dreams. I wanted to come to America; it was a dream. It was coming true. I was planning to get engaged two months before I left.

I asked her how she decided to come to the U.S. She said, "I couldn't say that I would stay. How can I leave my family? If I decided to stay, I wouldn't see my family again." Aysha described the way war and the unexpected transition in her life changed her

expectations from the future when she said, “I know the future is not easy to reach. Even sometimes I think it is not reachable. I am being realistic. If I continued my study in Egypt, I will have already graduated. I kept starting over. Then started over.”

### **Marwa**

Marwa is a 19-year-old Syrian woman from Deer-Zur city. She is a very friendly, confident, and cheerful young woman. She lives with her family in the U.S. since their resettlement in 2016 from Turkey where they lived for four years. She has a Turkish fiancé in Turkey. Marwa is the oldest of her four siblings. She has one older brother who is still in Syria. Marwa speaks Arabic, Turkish, and English. She wanted to meet me at her place. When I couldn't find her apartment, I called her. As I was looking for her apartment, Marwa came outside waving her hand and shouting “Abla” which means "older sister" in Turkish.

She was wearing a colorful hijab with white and grey patterns on it, one that looked very different than those black hijabs that I knew. But it still covered her body, leaving only her face visible. Marwa greeted me with her big blue, bright eyes, and surprised me with her fluent Turkish. When we went up to her apartment, her mother welcomed me with Marwa's sisters and Fatima, the interpreter who arrived there a bit earlier than I did. Marwa took off her cover as soon as we got into the apartment. She hanged her hijab to the hanger right by the door with a sleight of hand. She hugged me as if we were very close friends. She was calling me “abla” all the time. I noticed that she looked more of her age without the cover. As we exchanged some words with her mother, I could tell where she got her big blue eyes and long brunette hair.

Marwa's family had a tiny, nicely furnished apartment. The main door opened to the living room which had a wall that separated the living area from the dining room. As soon as we settled, Marwa's mother invited us to the table to eat some traditional food she prepared. As a typical Middle Eastern woman, she insisted until we gave up and accepted to have a seat. After eating some food and talking over the food at the table, Marwa and I decided to start the interview in the living room. Fatima looked like she was in a deep conversation with Marwa's mother. Since Marwa began our conversation in Turkish and she was very fluent, I told Fatima that we would speak in Turkish and ask her for help if we needed. She said she would come to the living room shortly.

Marwa was in eleventh grade when she had to leave Syria, but she started from ninth grade when they resettled in the U.S. She started to describe the war zone as soon as the interview began. She described,

Here it is good. When we were there, during the war in Syria, the warplanes were flying over our head. This close (shows her head). Very close. All our neighbors were gone. Our houses were gone. I could see them. They bombed.

She became silent for a couple of minutes. I could hear her deep breath with an intention to continue as she spaced out. She continued, "We were very scared. We went to the other cities: no car, nothing. We walked. We left just like that (showing her clothing), without everything." I thought her tone of voice implied that it was all she had to share about the wartime.

Having waited one minute or so, I asked her how she felt about their time in Turkey and the decision to resettle in the U.S. after living there for four years. She said,

I wanted that. I was happy because of school. The school is good. But life is not as good as in your Turkey. Only for school, it is good here. Here no one visits each other. There is no one, no neighbors. No one talks to you. We use the internet to communicate.

Marwa was very expressive of her emotions as she talked. She continued with her experiences at school when they first arrived in the U.S.,

It was difficult because I didn't speak English well. I didn't understand what they were saying. They kept asking me why I came, why I had hijab, why I wore that. I was upset. I didn't know how or what to tell them. English is difficult. Other things were easy. I didn't know anyone here when we came. I didn't have any friends. Now I have friends, from Syria as well.

Marwa described the difficulties she has experienced in her new life further. She told us that her American friends were mostly kind to her. Those who weren't nice would question why she had to wear hijab or why they came to the U.S. She said she has had a hard time expressing herself and responding to their insisting questions in English.

She explained her feelings about her status and being a Muslim woman when she said,

Here, it is mixed. It is not only white Americans. There are Mexican Americans mostly. And some Mexicans are not smiling back to us. Mexicans are staring at us. I notice it at work, after school. I don't know why they are like that. They are not from here. They don't even have paperwork. We are here legally. Sometimes, at school, they ask why we have hijab. At work, if I go to the restroom or so they complain that I don't work. Well, I don't know why that matters to them.

She took a sip from the tea her sister offered us while we were talking and continued, “Some of them are very nice. At work, there is a woman. When I don’t talk much, she comes and asks me how I feel. She is very nice. Some are very good people.” She explained the challenges when she said, “Speaking in English and lack of friends, friendship.” I noticed her voice getting lower and lower as she talked. Her big smile also disappeared gradually. She said,

My brother is not here. I miss him. I miss my Syrian friends, our relatives. We have no family here. Among our relatives, it was only us; we could come here because my sisters were sick.

Marwa also told us about the way her lifestyle changed as a woman. She mentioned how as a woman she was not allowed to go out by herself without one of her family members in Syria. She pointed out the gender equality here in the U.S.,

Well, here when I see women here, I see them like all men. They work, they go out like men. They are all the same. No difference between women and men.

They are the same.

She became more energetic as she started to talk about the differences she experienced. Her eyebrows raised as if she remembered one important detail when she started to talk again. She said it was interesting to take a class on relationships where they talked about the importance of having one partner to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. She continued,

Here you can be with someone, it is ok. And they say it is ok but be with one only. In Syria, you don’t talk to male friends. You can’t have a boyfriend. It is banned. Here you can have a male-female friendship. Guys can talk to girls.

Marwa used to go to gender-segregated school in Syria. She said they all had to wear uniforms - a long dress in Syria, but here she wears her hijab at school. She added, “Here you can wear whatever you want to wear. You can’t differentiate a teacher from a student from their clothing.”

Marwa told us that her teachers were mostly nice to her, but she felt like some would not prefer talking to her unless they had to. She sounded like she didn’t care much about it but explained, “Maybe because of hijab. I don’t know. Maybe because I don’t know English well enough.” After her description of some of the differences in her school life, Marwa noted that she couldn’t do her prayers at school, but she could do it at work and added, “There is no Ezan (call to prayer from the mosques) outside. I wish there was namaz.” Marwa continued to describe the challenges she faced in her daily life,

When we came, it was interesting to see there were no people on the streets. No markets, not stores on the streets. In Turkey, there were vendors on the street.

There was street life. Here everywhere is so far away. You need to drive. It is a problem.

So, she got a driver’s license. For Marwa, life in America has challenges, but it also gives her some freedom. She mentioned that she would meet her friends outside, go shopping with them by herself but her plan is eventually going back to Turkey after completing her school and getting a nursing degree in the U.S.

### **Reflection on the Interview Process and the Stories**

All the women I interviewed were friendly, welcoming, and willing to share their stories. Before the interviews, I was confident that I would connect with them easily because of our cultural similarities. They were very sincere, and I felt that we could relate

to each other as soon as we met. Given the circumstances of refugees in Turkey, I already had heartfelt worries for refugee women and children after the Syrian war, but I did not think the interviews and the data analysis process would become such an emotionally intense experience for me. Each story touched my heart deeply and left me with mixed feelings. I couldn't help thinking; how would one handle losing pieces of her identity: her country, land, home, people, while coping with the challenges of a new, unknown life in a new country, with a foreign language, in a different culture, yet still preserve her state of mind to appreciate being alive.

I read the transcriptions and listened to the interviews numerous times. While listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts over and over, I reflected on our conversation by taking further notes on my researcher's journal. As a researcher, I was expecting them to tell me their stories in one breath, but as an objective listener, and as a 'sister' as Marwa called, I could feel that it was not easy for them to talk about their life. The war trauma they experienced left them with the fear, pain, grief of loss, and genuine gratitude to have survived. In each response with a pause, I could feel the vulnerability of their life. I knew that I needed to read their story between the lines since it was not easy for them to describe everything in words. Each time they took a deep breath, each time they spaced out, each time they started a sentence with "all the praises and thanks be to Allah", I knew that they debated if the challenges or the differences they experienced in the U.S. were worth mentioning compared to the remnants of war in their wounded souls. Therefore, it was crucial to note down and reflect on their nonverbal language as well.

Having fled their country at the breakout of the war in Syria, they started over a new life in the first-asylum countries they arrived. Even if each participant had a unique

story, they all had similar motivation and expectations to start over again and resettle in the U.S.; provision of safe space, health support, better opportunities, and a possible future for their kids. All the participants have been living in the U.S. since 2016 which was the time when the Obama administration exceeded its goal to admit 10, 000 Syrian refugees by the refugee resettlement program and reached 18,007 Syrian refugees in the U.S. (Zong & Battalova, 2017).

Farah and her family was the first Syrian refugee family resettled to this Southwestern city in Texas in 2016. Turkey was the first asylum country that Zainab, Marwa, and Lana migrated to before they relocated to the U.S. Aysha had migrated to Egypt, while Maryam and Farah had lived in Jordan before they resettled in the U.S. All mentioned that they were caught by surprise when they found out about the acceptance of their resettlement applications. Also, the resettlement process was speedy. As soon as they found out about their admission, the agency informed them that they had only a couple of weeks to leave for the U.S. One common misconception that most of the participants had about the resettlement process to the U.S. was their expectation of free housing, free food, and a more prolonged period of financial support. In their first months of arrival, the lack of neighborhood life and accessibility to the public spaces in walking distance as they used to have in their home country were significantly challenging experiences as neither of them could speak English. Several major themes and subthemes unfolded as I analyzed the data further.

The following is the interview I made with Fatima, the interpreter. She provides her point of view as a case manager working at an organization that helps refugees and immigrants in their resettlement process. The next chapter describes the overlapping

themes and subthemes delineating the acculturation experiences of the participants filtered through the lens of intersectionality theory.

### **Fatima, the Interpreter**

Fatima is an American citizen, Iraqi Muslim woman. She has been living in a Southwestern city in Texas since 2007. She speaks Arabic and English. Fatima started her current work as a volunteer and then she became a case manager for the refugee and immigrant resettlement program. She works at a church-based organization that helps refugee and immigrants' resettlement. I met her through one of my colleagues who also volunteered at the same organization for some time. Her responsibilities include welcoming refugees and asylees at the airport, going to shopping and hospitals with them and helping them with the other daily routines and interpretation in their first couple of months.

I interviewed Fatima about her experiences with the Syrian Muslim refugee women that she met through her organization and helped them with their resettlement. First, she shared her experiences with the refugee women in general, specifically those from Middle Eastern countries. She told me that some families were easier than others in terms of assisting them. From her experience, some people could adjust faster than others but especially for the elderly, it is more difficult to adapt to a new lifestyle. Fatima reflected on her experiences further,

Because some people have a family at home, for example, some kids are very related to their grandparents. And some are not eager to learn anything new. They make things harder for them from the beginning like they don't want to go to school, you know, it is like differences in character. The first three months are the

hardest. The younger they are, the fastest they get adjusted. If they still have family back home, they want to go back.

Fatima also mentioned the financial difficulties and concerns that refugees faced. She said,

For most families, we pay for the rent for six months. Some of them find it very hard when they find out how much it is going to cost them to pay the utilities and rent. We tell them they save the money we gave them at the beginning, and we have an employment team, which finds a job for them. We tell them that they are not going to save too much money, but they will be like other American families, they will be paying their rent like everybody else.

Regarding the Syrian refugees her organization provides resettlement services for, she said, “We did not have too many Syrian families. For Syrians, all of them, they witnessed all the killings, dead bodies on the streets.”

Regarding their participation in the ESL programs, Fatima told me that language was one of the main challenges for refugees. She explained to me,

Once they attend the courses, they think if they go to the English courses it will be very fast within some time; they are done. Some of them go to the English classes, some of them can not schedule with the kids, with kids’ schools. So, they don’t go. Some of them want to go but they can’t because of the transportation problem. Mostly, Syrian women like to stay home. They are used to like; taking care of their family, cooking for kids. For them, wife working? They cannot accept it. We have people working from all, even Muslim. Iraqi women Muslim,

working, we have Somalian Muslim women working. They are all Muslim women all working, but it is a culture thing.

I asked Fatima if she could share her experiences as a Muslim woman living in the U.S. and working as a case manager for Muslim refugee women. She mentioned some of her experiences with the social workers and their attitudes towards her and refugee women. She began,

When we take people to the foodstamp office, we know what kind of medicaid people can have or not. Sometimes if I don't have my badge with me, if I don't present myself as a case manager from where I work, they won't do their jobs, we ask for certain medicaid, for example, she says, 'ok, because of the income, this person is not eligible.' I ask 'can she have the other type?' I know it takes long on the computer to look for options or if the person is eligible. So, she would just say 'no this person is not eligible' I know sometimes they think you are ignorant.

Fatima also shared another incident when a person working at the social security office complained to her that refugees would never work, they would come into the country and would start getting the benefits. She also said in some cases; those officers wouldn't even look at the papers and tell her that the families were not eligible for the benefits. She mentioned she had to talk to their supervisors a couple of times because of that. She continued,

I know sometimes there are small things here and there, but it is ok. In general, if people try they reach what they want, there are no barriers. Even if there are some barriers, I mean we need to try more and more. I feel like people have more and more chances in U.S. to be better than in their own countries. They can study, do

whatever they want. If they want to reach a goal, if they try, they will reach because there are good people and bad people everywhere. You cannot let somebody stop you because you are wearing a hijab or because you look different or because you are this or that. What I see, because there are a lot of women, they reached what they wanted here.

Fatima also said as the resettlement agencies; they had support groups for refugees from different nations, English classes, counseling services, and various resources. She explained,

There are English programs offered by the school districts, by the city, by a lot of programs in the community. So, for me, it is not a barrier. I know a person; she is going to English classes for four years. We do have a program specifically for Muslim women, and vulnerable women. I mean, we do have resources.

Finally, Fatima explained that refugees would receive support from their first day in the country until the fifth year of their resettlement. She said,

For example, I would go to the airport, pick them up, bring them to their apartment, to the school district, vaccines, show them every step to start even we have people, volunteers, to show them how to take the busses, to go to library, to do shopping. They can call us even after years if they needed something. I mean, the agency can help them not only six months, they can help them upto five years. Maybe for six months monetary, financially but after six months, they still receive help. We tell them that. They know.

Interviewing Fatima helped me examine her point of view and experiences with refugees in their resettlement process. She was familiar with the challenges that refugee women

experienced. She also had a cultural knowledge and understanding of Syrian Muslim women's lives. She expressed her experiences as a Muslim immigrant woman but also as a case manager assisting Muslim refugee women in their interaction with the service providers during their resettlement process. Talking to Fatima and listening to what she lived helped me know about her background and what she might be bringing to her interpretive work.

## V. THE THEMES AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This study employed narrative inquiry methods, examining the data from the perspectives of acculturation and intersectionality theories in order to explore the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women living in the U.S. Specifically, the research aimed to answer two research questions: What are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.? How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

As discussed in the review of the literature, acculturation experiences of Muslim Arab immigrants have been examined in a plethora of research. However, limited research has sought to understand acculturation experiences specifically from the perspective of the intersections of multiple identities. Examining the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women enabled me to address how the intersectionality of refugee women identities affects their acculturation experiences. The data for this study were gathered from the responses of six participants in semi-structured interviews.

In this chapter, I describe and interpret the themes and subthemes that I identified from my data analysis. The study findings are composed of six fundamental themes: towards the battle; fleeing for life; a new life and new challenges; intersecting identities and acculturation preferences; positive feelings and positive interactions; and finally, hope and future aspirations. The second theme, fleeing for life comprises the following subthemes: loss; grief and sadness; fear of the unknown; and trauma. The third theme is comprised of five sub-themes: a new life; new challenges include the subthemes of

language proficiency; insufficient financial support and cultural orientation; and lack of public spaces in walking distance and mobility. Finally, intersecting identities and acculturation preferences include the following subthemes: gender identity; religious identity; national identity; and refugee status.

Table. 1 Summary of Themes

Three-Dimensional Narrative Inquiry Space by Clandinin & Connelly (2000)			
Continuity			
	Past <i>Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times</i>	Present <i>Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event</i>	Future <i>Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines</i>
Interaction: Personal & Social	<p><b>THEME I:</b> Towards the Battle</p> <p><b>THEME II:</b> Fleeing for Life</p> <p><b>Subthemes:</b> Loss Grief and sadness Fear of the unknown Trauma</p>	<p><b>THEME III:</b> A New Life, New Challenges</p> <p><b>Subthemes:</b> Language proficiency Insufficient financial and cultural support Lack of accessible public spaces in walking distance</p>	<p><b>THEME VI:</b> Hope and Future Aspirations</p>
		<p><b>THEME V:</b> Positive Feelings and Positive Interactions</p>	
		<p><b>THEME IV:</b> Intersecting Identities and Acculturation Preferences</p> <p><b>Subthemes:</b> Gender identity Religious identity National and ethnic identity Refugee status</p>	
	<p>Situation/Place</p> <p><i>Context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view.</i></p>		

### **Towards the Battle**

The story of each participant started with an ordinary, happy life; they described a satisfying past. Zainab, for example, told us, “Before the war; we were fine, happy in our homes. Once the war started, we had to go from one village to another. Because we were running away, moving.” Likewise, Maryam said, “Our life was good. My husband was working, and everything was okay. Because living in your own country is the best.” Farah’s story also began with her ordinary life, “We were living a good life in Damascus. My husband had a place to sell sweets and cakes with his brothers. It was the beginning of the problem in Syria when I went to Jordan for a vacation.” But, the outbreak of war changed everything.

### **Fleeing for Life**

According to the UNHRC report (2017), Syria has continued to be the largest forcibly displaced population in the world in previous years. The report shows that as of 2017, there have been 12.6 million forcibly displaced Syrians. This number includes 6.3 million refugees, 146,700 asylum-seekers, and 6.2 million internally displaced people (UNHCR, 2017). The reasons for leaving Syria include the bombing of their neighborhoods; fear of rape, killings, arrest, killed family members, violence between the sects; and health (Washington & Rowell, 2013). The participants in this study reported that the war caught them unprepared. Having left everything behind, the survivors of the war escaped their hometowns to the unknown, for the same reasons reported above. “Once the war started, we had to go from one village to another. Because we were running away, moving,” said Zainab. Fleeing home to the first-asylum countries was a very traumatic experience. Farah told us,

We had a problem going to Jordan by the border when I was at the border. They let me go, but they said my son who was 14 had to stay. The government said he was 14, and they said they need people, they need boys. So, they didn't let him go. He is only 14. I was begging to all the soldiers. But they were very rough and mean. I stayed all day over there like crying and begging to let him go because he was only a child of 14. All I did was I made "dua" (praying); at the end of the day that guy he told me to wait until the soldiers change shift. The time when they were changing shift, that one said, 'go take him to the car.'

Marwa explained the severity of their escape in these words: "During the war in Syria, the warplanes were flying over our head. This close (shows her head). Very close. All our neighbors were gone. Our houses were gone. I could see them. They bombed. [Sighs] We were very scared." Similarly, Maryam described witnessing the war and fleeing for their lives all of a sudden.

According to the Syrian American Medical Society Foundation annual report, (2014) 65% of Syrian refugees have psychological trauma. The International Medical Corps report gathered from data from the health clinics that provide services to the Syrian refugees and the Syrian health network also show an increasing number of Syrian refugees diagnosed with psychiatric illnesses, post-traumatic stress disorders, and very intense emotional disturbance (Jefee-Bahloul, BarkilOteo, Pless-Mulloli, & Fouad, 2015). Likewise, the participants in this study still carry the remnants of the war on their shoulders and in their wounded souls. Their war experiences include loss, grief and sadness, fear of the unknown, and trauma.

## **Loss**

One of the common themes that unfolded from the participants' experiences of surviving the war was loss. When they lost their families, possessions, homes, and their land, they also lost pieces of their identities, status, and senses of the self. As Rochberg-Halton (1984) explains, people create meaning for their 'selves' through the valuable possessions they have and, in that way, their valued possessions become their extended selves.

Zainab reflected that when she said, "Before we had everything and when the war started, we had nothing. [Sighs] We went to zero. In Syria, I felt like I had everything. I had three houses, our land. We had an extended family." For her possessions meant their life, their identity, and future for her kids. Zainab explained to us,

We built three houses for our three sons. We had everything for the girls for when they get married. We had everything together even for the ten years old and eleven years old. I feel so bad and sad because I lost everything. Now we have nothing. I had everything, even gold and everything for the kids, ready for the marriages.

Farah told us how she decided to risk her life and go back to the war to find the parents she lost during the war. She explained to us,

I decided with my husband to go back to Syria, go through the gardens and like places where they cannot see us, and we could find my parents. I couldn't stay because I would die from thinking of where they were. I found some members of my family living with other families. No water, no gas, no electricity, no furniture in our house.

Marwa also emphasized their loss when she described their escape from the war: “We left just like that, without everything.” For Maryam, a couple of handicrafts were all she could bring from home. According to Papadopoulos (2002), having the basic sense of home is a foundational part of one’s identity which is formed as a ‘mosaic’ consisting of other elements such as belonging to a country, a group language, or belonging to a landscape. When this mosaic is unharmed, people can develop skills to manage their lives and predict what is expected from them and what to expect from life. On the contrary, when this mosaic is disturbed, as in the case of refugees have lost their country, home, and possessions, it creates an ambiguous, confusing, and disorienting gap.

### **Grief and Sadness**

Throughout the interview, I could feel the grief and sadness of the participants. It was sometimes hidden in their body language, occasionally apparent in their tearful eyes or just in simple words. Zainab could not hide her emotions when she was talking about losing everything they had. She said, “I feel so bad and sad.” with tearful eyes. Maryam was very upset when she mentioned she could not be with her mother in her last days. She said, “Even my mother died while I was here. I couldn’t see her.” Farah was in tears when she started to talk about her first days in the U.S.:

I was not feeling good. I cried every day. I wanted to go back to Jordan. Because in Jordan there are stores, people. To be alone and to be a stranger is harder. One time when we moved here, I went to the mosque, and I prayed to God that he gives me friends, like my sisters, like my family.

I could feel the deep sadness that Aysha tried to hide while she was fidgeting with her fingers. She said in a quavering voice,

It has been a very bad story. It took me a lot of tears, took me a lot of things. Also, it is good not to show your weakness. If I didn't come here, I would already have my kids now. I was planning to get engaged two months before I left.

### **Fear of the Unknown**

Migrating to a different country, different culture, and starting over with a new life bears uncertainty in all aspects of life. It was what all the participants felt about the unknown future awaiting them and their families in the U.S. "If we are here, it is not our choice. We are also humans, and we want to see our future too", said Lana when she told me how she felt about her refugee status. Maryam recalled, "We were scared at the beginning. How we are going to adjust, how we are going to go, it was like something unknown. We were confused at the beginning. We didn't know what to do." Farah expressed how she felt when they first found out about their resettlement to the U.S. She said, "My kids were happy. But my husband and I didn't want to leave. I was scared of the unknown, uncertainties." Aysha emphasized she wouldn't plan anything anymore. She said, "I will see, how life goes. I didn't plan to come to the U.S. I didn't plan to go to business school. I don't know what the future has. I don't know what will happen next."

### **Trauma**

The war, fleeing for life, and trying to start over with a new life full of uncertainties were traumatizing experiences for all the women in this study. Maryam described the time when they tried to escape: "War traumatized us because we saw many bad things, blood, and corps like on the floor. It made us more scared." Likewise, what Farah witnessed at the war zone when she went back to Syria to find her parents was shocking. She emphasized the trauma she experienced in these words: "There were

corpses on the streets. You don't find regular streets. Either burnt or on the streets. That makes you very sick." Aysha told us how the war affected her in these words: "Actually, I wouldn't like to share anything from Syria. You can ask me about Egypt, about here. But about Syria, I don't want. It has been about seven years. I am still trying to recover from it." She also explained that her family dynamics had changed with migration and that she had become the primary person they relied on since they had resettled in the U.S. as she was the only one who could speak English. She expressed her state of mind in these words: "I am having a mental, emotional, and physical depression."

During our conversation with each of the participants of this study, even when we were not talking about the war, I could feel the devastation and trauma they experienced in my heart. I could see, and tell from their eyes, their words, in moments of silence, and prayers. Khalil (2013), a psychiatrist who examined Syrian refugees in Lebanon expressed the effects of trauma that refugees had experienced during the pre-migration process in these words:

In every one of these patients, I see intense, irreversible mistrust and a lack of belief in every principle or rule that is supposed to control our relationships with each other. I see question marks regarding the meaning of their whole existence as well as the meanings behind the most important concepts that seemed unquestionable to them in the past, such as religion, politics, work, family, and finally, last, but not least, health. (p. 1397)

The review of the literature (Almontaser & Baumann, 2017; Alpak et al., 2013; Hauff and Vaglum, 1993; Lindert, Ehrenstein, Priebe, Mielck, & Brahler, 2009; Lipson, 1993) confirmed that pre-migration trauma, loss, violence, and conflict results in mental health

issues among refugees. In a very recent study that examined the trauma exposure of Syrian refugees resettled in Sweden, Chung et al. (2018) suggested that PTSD and other psychiatric problems were possible mental health issues in almost one-third of refugees. Studies on acculturation confirm that refugee the acculturation process is influenced by trauma experienced prior to migration (Henry, 2012; James, 2010; LeMaster et al., 2018; Vasquez, 2012). For example, in a longitudinal study of Iraqi refugees, LeMaster et al. (2018) assessed the refugees upon their arrival to the U.S. and one year after migration. The results of the study suggest that pre-migration trauma was related to PTSD and depressive symptoms and decreased acculturation one year later.

Consistent with the literature, in this study, even though none of the participants shared whether they had been medically diagnosed with any mental health issues, their heartbreaking stories, descriptions of what they had witnessed at war, their body language, and their emotional responses when they talked about those times indicate that the war experience was traumatizing for them.

## **Summary**

During the pre-migration phase, the participants were living ordinary lives, but suddenly found themselves in the midst of battle. They had to leave everything behind while fleeing their homes for their lives. Every participant described experiences of loss, grief and sadness, fear of the unknown, and trauma.

## **A New Life, New Challenges**

Acculturation is defined as the “the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (Berry, 2005, p. 698). The findings of this study help us

understand the nature of the contact relationship when one has minority refugee status in dominant society, and what that experience meant for the participants and the psychological qualities that acculturating individuals bring to the new society (Sam & Berry, 2010). Cultural knowledge and language competence have been proposed as crucial dimensions of the acculturation process (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010). The dissimilarities such as language or religion between two cultures in contact result in a less positive adaptation process for immigrants (Berry, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Searle & Ward, 1991) which is significantly related to acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997). Therefore, it is important to know the language of the host community to communicate cultural information and to learn about the norms and values to improve sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Besides the differences in cultures, language and transportation barriers, climatic differences, accessing services, financial problems and illiteracy are among the documented problems that refugees encounter (Barnett et al., 2009; Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, & Teboh, 2011).

In this study, these issues, which the participants also expressed, are listed as subthemes under the main theme, “a new life and new challenges”. The subthemes include language proficiency; insufficient financial and cultural support; and lack of accessible public spaces in walking distance and mobility.

### **Language Proficiency**

One of the biggest challenges for all the participants in this study is English proficiency. Zainab reflected on her feelings about the language challenge she faces, “The problem is the language which is very hard for me. It is like a very big stone in front of me.” She described her first days: “It was hard. We were using the gestures so that we

can understand each other. We used the telephone to interpret saying we needed somebody to get us water, get this or that.” Zainab also shared a funny story about the language barrier she experienced. She began,

When we came, we bought many things, food, but brought the wrong things. We had to throw everything away. One time there was nobody at home, and the shower was broken. I couldn’t fix it. I didn’t know what to do. The water wouldn’t stop pouring. They say come to the office when you have a problem. So, I went to the resettlement agency and tried to tell them what happened. But they wouldn’t understand. I had to take a bottle of water and pretend that I shower in the middle of the office.

Even though, she participated in an ESL program in her first months in the U.S., she said she could not continue with the classes because of the responsibilities she had at home.

For Zainab, language also means community and belonging. She told us,

One of the things that makes me feel good here and feel stable and feel happy, I came and find that there is a lot of people that speak my language. A lot of people like Arabs, Muslims. It doesn’t mean from our country but the same community.

Aysha, who had started working as a receptionist, explained the challenges she experienced at the workplace because she was not confident enough to speak in English. She said that she could find a job, but she could barely speak English. She was also very shy. She continued, “I didn’t speak until someone asked me a question or I have to answer or do it. And my job was the receptionist. It was like; I had to respond.”

She described how language is still a burden for other family members as well. She said,

For example, if anything happens at my siblings' school, my mother she can go, she can try as much she can to find out the problem, but it is tough with the language. They have to go with me even though I am like sleeping.

Aysha explained to us that her parents and siblings depended on her for everything they needed and whenever they encountered a problem in or out of their house, or at her siblings' schools.

Marwa also talked about the challenges she faced at school because of English. She told that she could not understand her friends or express herself in English. She said, "It was difficult because I didn't speak English well. I didn't understand what they were saying. They kept asking me why I came to the U.S., why I had hijab, why I wore that. I was upset. I didn't know how or what to tell them. English is difficult. She also mentioned she couldn't connect with her teachers as they would not talk to her unless they had to. She explained, "maybe because of hijab. I don't know. Maybe because I don't know English well enough."

For Lana, English is one of the reasons why she cannot participate in social life. She said, "I don't know the language. I am secluded. I would like to be involved in American life, American people." When I asked her why she did not continue with the ESL program, she also mentioned her other responsibilities at home as Zainab did.

Fatima, the interpreter for this study who also works as a case manager for Syrian refugees shared her perspective on language challenge for refugees. In congruent with the explanations of the participants, in our interview, she told me that gender roles play a big role in the participation of women in language programs provided by the resettlement programs. Since women have other responsibilities such as taking care of the kids and

cooking for the family, they often cannot complete the language programs even if they start to attend. Therefore, English becomes a big burden in their life in the U.S.

Aligned with the literature on the relationship between language fluency and sociocultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1993a) and acculturative stress (Berry, 2005), participants indicated that they felt isolated from the host culture, stressed, challenged, and oppressed due to the lack of language proficiency and inability to defend and express themselves when they were in contact with people from the host community.

### **Insufficient Financial Support and Cultural Orientation**

The participants told us that they received some help when they arrived in the U.S. The refugee resettlement agencies provided services that helped the refugees with employment and language skills classes. As other refugees also reported in previous studies (Brown, 2018; Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, & Teboh, 2011), the participants expressed that the support they received in their first months was insufficient. Farah explained her expectations,

In the beginning, we needed a community when the resettlement agency couldn't have time for us... The first month, it was very hard for us.

She told us that her son got his driver's license and they bought a car for him. She continued,

He helped all the new people, other Syrian families who came after us with the medication, going to the doctor's appointment, everything, like shopping. The families that came after us, we didn't want them to have the same problems.

Lana also complained about the lack of counseling services when they arrived. For example, she said, "When we came, we needed more help, like counseling. We

needed time to learn how life in the U.S., the rules, and everything. It is not easy in the U.S.” She continued,

I had a shock when we came because we were coming to America. We were thinking that in America we were going to find everything like complete, everything good. But we had the shock. Not like we were surprised; it was a shock.

Marwa had a similar expectation: “We were told that they would give us a salary. They would provide the refugees with monthly payment, food, rent.” Likewise, Zainab told us, “We were expecting that the rent would be paid all the time. And, like free food, free housing. And that we would have all the furniture and everything when we came. We were expecting more things.” These findings support other findings that refugees develop high, but unrealistic expectations about life in the U.S. and the support they will receive for their resettlement (Baran, Valcea, Porter, & Gallagher, 2018).

### **Lack of Accessible Public Spaces in Walking Distance and Mobility**

The lack of accessibility effects immigrant socialization (Bose, 2014; Miller & Rasco, 2004; Shen Ryan, 1992), pose barriers to acculturation, self-empowerment, and community- building (Bose, 2014) and cause transport related exclusion (Uteng, 2009). That is why refugee mobility issues should be considered more than just an inconvenience (Bose, 2014). The differences in city life such as the lack of accessible public spaces within walking distance and mobility are among the challenges the participants have faced since coming to the U.S. For Farah, that was one of the most challenging changes they experienced as a family in their first months. She told us,

When we came, we were in another area, that complex didn't have anything near. It is more excluded. We had to take a bus to do groceries, stores. I was by myself. I had allergies. There were only one or more Arab families. It was hard for me to get adjusted. The first three months, it was very hard for us. There were no Syrian or Arab families. I was not feeling good. I cried every day. I wanted to go back to Jordan. Because in Jordan there are stores, people.

Aysha described her feelings about stores getting closed at certain days and time at her neighborhood. She said, "Culture shock. I don't know if you heard about Egypt, they are open 24 hours seven days a week."

Similarly, Marwa told us, "Here everywhere is so far away. You need to drive. It is a problem." She also said that her work was far from where she lived, and it was difficult for her. Lana mentioned how she felt secluded because of living far from the city. She said, "I don't drive, I live too far from other people." Lastly, Zainab told us that she was mostly at home since she could not drive.

The participants expressed how the lack of accessible public spaces influenced their daily life and socialization in negative ways. The literature review speaks to this, pointing out that upon finding themselves in a very different cultural environment as a result of migration, immigrants start to question various aspects of their personal and social identities (Padilla & Perez, 2003). That is why having a group identity and identifying themselves with a larger structure becomes a crucial part of their self-concept. Consistent with the literature reviewed (Padilla & Perez, 2003), the participants emphasized their need to build a community and feel a sense of belonging, and preference to interact with people from a similar ethnic background, religion, and

language. Specifically, they talked about their need for a social environment where they can go out for shopping and meet their social needs without being forced to commute long distances and into unfamiliar areas.

### **Summary**

The participants experienced challenges in their new lives upon migration. Language was a common challenge that prevented them from interacting with people in the host community and engage in social life. It also limited their access to existing opportunities, resources, and social support. They also emphasized having unmet expectations in terms of financial support in their first months of the resettlement. Lastly, participants pointed out the effects of living far from public spaces, shopping centers, and communities on their socialization and adaptation in negative ways. None of them could drive when they resettled in the U.S. therefore, mobility has been one of the biggest problems that have influenced their acculturation.

### **Intersecting Identities and Acculturation Preferences**

In this study, the stories of the participants also indicate how they prefer to position their multiple intersecting identities in a new cultural environment. In this new context, they experience changes in their gender roles that lead them to become self-dependent individuals. They navigate through the power issues because of their religious identity, refugee status, and the pressure of cultural differences, as well as perceived and experienced discrimination due to their nationality, religion, and refugee status. Their experiences with their intersecting identities determine their preferences of how to, and with whom to interact.

## **Gender Identity**

One of the most significant changes the participants described experiencing in the U.S. was regarding their gender roles. While some attributes of their gender identity stigmatized and isolated them in their new life, changes in their gender roles sometimes promoted independence and positive feelings toward the host culture.

For Zainab, going to the hospital by herself and seeing men and women sitting in the same place was a big difference. She explained,

In Syria, the hospital was far. I used to take some male with me. Now it is different. I go by myself. And, also when we are sitting, people come over.

Women were sitting in another, separate places than men at home. Now it is okay.

They sit together. Families, men, and women.

Zainab also described her roles in the family: "Most of the time I am home. Besides, going to friends, doctors' visit mostly, everything else is the same. I am not driving. I don't make decisions. The decisions, I ask the family."

Zainab's statements were indicative of the gender inequalities in her culture. In terms of the gender roles at home, echoing what the literature (Edmonds, 2005; Yacoub, 2014) confirms about Middle Eastern women, she preserved her traditional values and roles even after they moved to America. Just like the other four participants, she doesn't work. She is a stay-at-home mom. She depends on her husband for going anywhere that is not within walking distance as she cannot drive. Thus, her exposure to the dominant society is limited. On the other hand, Zainab told us that she appreciated the gender equality in the U.S. and had positive attitudes towards this culture since women are

considered as individuals independent of their families or husbands. She expressed her perspective on gender differences in these words:

Yes, women here sometimes they have to work. It is good for her to go out and learn. In our country it is different, we are like not 'much civilized', but here we have to. I feel like women. I encourage my girls. They are working; they are driving. I encourage my girls to learn, to take trips, to do everything. I am not against it.

Maryam also mentioned having different gender roles in her new life and how those changes influenced her identity. She told us,

There are a lot of differences. My kids were very surprised at how people were wearing shorts, especially adults, like women wearing shorts, not covered. I changed my way of clothing. I used to wear a long coat, and my husband said it is better to change it to a long-sleeved blouse and pants. Still covered. I didn't want to change at the beginning, but my husband insisted and kept saying that people would keep looking at me and stuff. So, I changed. I had just the long Manteaux and I changed it to regular pants.

Her husband's suggestion and preference for Maryam's less outward expression of religious and ethnic identity indicates the role of men in the decision making for women. At the same time, from his attempt to accommodate their values and beliefs while integrating into the dominant social environment, it appears that he tried to prevent her from being stigmatized because of her physical attributes. As Padilla and Perez (2003) suggest, certain attributes such as the color of skin, accent in speech, religious clothing, or gender may result in negative stigmatization. That in turn influences the acculturation

of immigrants. Being identifiable as a Muslim refers to being a Muslim woman in hijab (Benson, 2014). Therefore, discrimination against Muslims is a gendered fact that affects Muslim women to a great extent (Benson, 2014). Maryam feels the pressure to change the way she dresses in public. Compared to a Muslim man, with her specific clothing (hijab), she is more distinguishable from the majority group and identifiable as “other”. On the other hand, unlike Zainab, who preferred adhering to her heritage culture in terms of involvement in daily life, Maryam chose to adopt some elements of the host culture. She reflected on her feelings of empowerment and self-dependence in the U.S. when she said,

I have a driver license now. I couldn't go out shopping by myself to do shopping in Jordan or Syria. Now I can do it. I grab one of the kids, and I go shopping in the malls or out. I am very happy that I go out by myself. I used to wait for my husband sometimes for two three days to get my things because he is busy, or he would be tired. Now anytime I want something, I go, drive by myself.

She described how different it used to be in Syria:

Here I can do things; I can rely on myself. In Syria woman is not. I mean people looked at me differently if I go shopping by myself or I drive. But, here it is different. I feel like I have more responsibilities and I am more self-dependent.

Having studied in gender segregated high school in Syria, Marwa now experiences a very different culture in the U.S. She explained these differences further: “In Syria, you don't talk to male friends. You can't have a boyfriend. It is banned. Here you can have male and female friends; a male can talk to girls.” She also becomes more independent like Maryam. Marwa told us,

I didn't use to go out by myself before. We used to go out together with my family before. Now I can go by myself. I didn't use to go out by myself in Syria, with my dad, or with my mother. If I went out by myself, my cousin in Turkey would tell me "why are you going out by yourself?". Well, here when I see women in here, I see them like all men. They work, they go out like men. They are all the same. No difference between women and men. They are the same.

Lana also reflected on being a woman in the U.S. and emphasized that she appreciates being a woman in the U.S. as she has more independence here.

She told us,

Here I can do more things by myself. In Syria, it is more conservative. I am 37. In the United States, you can go to school at any age. In our country, it is not proper. Number two, there you can't go out. It is like going out is very restricted. Here you can go out.

These narratives of the participants show how changes in their behavioral repertoire promoted self-confidence, empowerment, and independence. Berry (2005) explains this in three processes of acculturation: cultural shedding, culture learning, and cultural conflict. In the first two processes acculturating individuals experience "selective, accidental, or deliberate loss of behaviors and their replacement" (Berry, 2005, p. 707). Adapting how they dressed, interacting with men in public, going out and taking part in and assuming roles in daily life outside of the home without the guidance of men were some of the behaviors they engaged in to meet the new demands of their life in America. As Berry (1997) suggested in his description of acculturation strategies, the women in this study described positive attitudes towards some aspects of the dominant

culture and they tried to integrate into the new society. Even though the changes the women made liberated them in their daily lives, due to the intersection between their gender and religious identities, their adaptation did not necessarily buffer the subordination or oppression they felt or experienced in the dominant host culture. In her study, Awad (2010) investigated the impact of acculturation, ethnic identity, and religious identification on perceived discrimination for people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent. The findings also suggested that the positive aspects of acculturation such as adapting to a new environment do not lessen discrimination towards the Arab Muslim community. On the contrary, Muslims who reported high dominant society immersion (adopting the behaviors or values of the dominant society) indicated the highest degree of discrimination (Awad, 2010).

### **Religious Identity**

The role of religion in reinforcing solidarity and group identity in immigrants has been examined by numerous researchers (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Haddad, 2004; Peek, 2005). Having a religious identity provides group identification and becomes a unifying factor for immigrants (Almahmoud, 2016; Peek, 2005) as well as effecting immigrants in a positive way by providing a sense of hope, meaning, and power for coping, which helps their adaptation to the dominant society (Hasan, Mitschke, & Ravi, 2018). On the other hand, having a religious identification which can be demonstrated visibly may trigger hostility and discrimination from the dominant society. Examples of this occurred after the terrorist attacks of September 11 (Ajrouch, 2005; Peek, 2005), and recently with the increase in anti-immigration politics and rhetoric (Ugurel Kamisli, Brooks, & Alston, 2018) followed by the imposed travel ban for people from a handful of mostly Muslim

countries, which resulted in violent anti-Muslim bias incidents aimed at Muslims or those perceived to be Muslims (Council of American Islamic Relations, 2018).

The participants in this study have had similar experiences related to wearing the hijab (headscarf), which is particular to women's religious identity. Their experiences only differed according to their preferences for interacting with their surroundings and involvement in American culture. For example, Zainab told us, "Praise be to Allah. I feel fine. Nobody has stopped me from wearing my hijab. Nobody has stopped me about my prayers or daily things that I do. I have no problem." But Zainab also told us that she mostly spends her time at home. She only goes out when she has to take her daughters to the clinic which is in walking distance. She has only one American acquaintance, and her only interaction with Americans is when she goes to the clinic for her daughters' doctor's appointments. Consistent with previous research (Awad, 2010), since Zainab didn't involve herself in the dominant community as much as other participants, her experiences differed from those who had more dominant culture involvement. For example, Farah felt like defending herself for being a Muslim woman in hijab when interacting with her neighbors. She told us, "Because I wear the scarf and everything. We had a neighbor, Mexican, at the beginning. I felt like they were scared of us." She explained how she dealt with that:

I always initiated a smile. People, if you stay far, they don't know you. People look at you with your hijab, and when you smile at them, you give them a reaction that I am not a bad person, here I am smiling to you. For me the idea is never be shy, never stay excluded. Never avoid eye contact.

Farah's effort to prove that she is a good person shows the way she chose to cope with the anti-Muslim bias in her environment.

Lana reflected on the extent of discrimination she had observed towards Muslims and how it made her feel:

People feel like that because of these things on the TV with Muslims and terrorists. If some Arab do something it is fast on the system, it stays on tv every single day, but if it somebody else does, they say he has a mental problem. And we feel the discrimination. Every country is different. It is always good and things bad. I just don't like this feeling of unwanted.

She added, "It does affect my involvement in the community because not everybody accepts my identity. They may not accept me."

Aysha mentioned how she was discouraged about wearing her hijab by her Syrian cousin who lives in the U.S. She told us,

At first it was my cousin who has been in San Antonio for 48 years. And he was in the Army, but he also was the first one that disappoints me. He said you can't study here with this thing on your head.

I asked Aysha if she experienced any challenges related to wearing hijab. She gave an example from the job applications she made: "During the interviews. I get interviews seven times, and I didn't get accepted. It puts me on more target." Marwa also had similar experiences. She told us, "They kept asking me why I had hijab, why I wore that. I was upset. I didn't know how or what to tell them." Maryam also noted, "I feel that when I go out, I am scared because it is not a Muslim country. I am scared that maybe something, somebody, something bad will happen. It is not like being at home."

The participants' encounters with anti-Muslim prejudice in the host community align with the recent research (Ajrouch, 2005; Awad, 2010; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017; Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 2018) that show Muslims among the religious groups that experience incidents motivated by religious bias the most. The results of American Muslim Pool by ISPU (2018) also show that among Muslim participants, women (69%) report a greater number of discrimination experiences as compared to Muslim men which indicate that religious and gender identities intersect in the experiences of Muslim women (Perry, 2014).

### **National and Ethnic Identity**

Ethnicity, as a concept, has been defined in various ways across different disciplines (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). Ethnic identity refers to "identification with a group that is perceived as being different from the majority, whether for cultural, racial or religious reasons" (Persky & Birman, 2005, p. 558). In this study, ethnic identity refers to the Arab Muslim identity of participants from the same nation, Syria. All the participants identify as Syrian Arabs. They reflected on the importance of interacting with people from the same ethnic and national identity during their adaptation process.

Zainab said, "We come together with Arabs from other countries; Syrian families here. We only have one American friend. We exchange visits with Syrian families every two weeks." Farah emphasized her family's need for an ethnic community when they first arrived. She said, "It was very hard for us. There were no Syrian or Arab families. I was not feeling good." She further explained how grateful she is now to have friends from the Arab community:

One time when we moved here, I went to the mosque, and I prayed to God that he gives me friends, like my sisters, like my family. I found very nice friends. Lately, I had a surgery, and my house was full of people, full of food for ten days. Even my husband was busy, I didn't need him. My friends were all around me. I didn't need my husband. They took me to the doctor. They did everything. I can't drive. They did everything for me.

Lana compared relationships with neighbors in the U.S. and back in her country and Turkey. She said she had some friends, but added,

Just from the Arab community. Syrians. I know other families. In general, life is hard in the U.S, and I would like to let them know that we need to be considered like regular people. Most of the Turkish people were very helpful. The problem here is there is no like, relationship with Americans, neighbors.

Ethnic identity is an aspect of acculturation that emphasizes individuals' sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Awad, 2010). Maryam emphasized that in these words: "There are other people who look like me, wearing the same things gives more confidence." According to Berry (2003), immersion in ethnic society is one way that predicts the level of acculturation. In this study, regarding the participants' ethnic and national identity, participants mostly interacted with people from their own ethnic and national background. Considering their prior experiences of prejudice and subordination because of their intersecting religious and national identities, their preference in ethnic immersion becomes understandable.

## **Refugee Status**

Similar to what has been discussed in the literature (Awad, 2010; Chung et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2007; Semaan, 2015), the participants in this study experienced pronounced effects of displacement because of war, cultural conflict, feelings of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination. As the survivors of war, they indicated their gratitude for being alive when they talked about resettlement experiences. Moreover, they expressed feelings of being oppressed because of prejudice within the host community regarding their refugee status and Muslim, Arab, and women identities. Having lost everything once they had in their mother land, they now experience losing their status as well as other attributes of their identities. Besides being Muslim Arab women in the U.S., as Syrian refugees they also described having to live in an unwelcoming atmosphere where negative discourses rejecting refugees have been contributing to an escalating hostility towards them (Council of American Islamic Relations, 2018). For example, Maryam said, “I am scared to encounter somebody who doesn’t like Muslims, or Arabs, or refugees or like foreigners.” Aysha once had an encounter with someone antagonistic to her religion and her status at work. She told us, “One of the clients called me ‘why don’t you go back to your country?’ Because I don’t belong here. And here is not a place to stay in it. I didn’t answer anything. I just started crying.” She continued,

I don’t like to be called refugees because I am paying everything. The only time I accepted people to call me refugees is when they pay it for me. Other than that, I am the same as you. I am paying the same as you. If that happened to me again, I got stronger than that time. If that happens to me again, I will just stay strong, with a stronger voice, I am here as you are. I am paying as much as you pay. You

don't have the right to ask me to go back to my country if you are going to ask, don't do it, because it is immigration land.

Being a refugee has been a challenging experience for Lana as well. She reflected that when she said,

We always have these feeling that we are not wanted. Even when we went to Jordan the same thing. Even in Turkey, some people would show that we are not wanted. We came here; people say they don't like Syrians. Everywhere we go. It is something we didn't choose to leave; we didn't choose to move.

Marwa also told about how she felt oppressed. She said,

Some Mexicans are not smiling back to us. Mexicans are staring at us. I notice it at work, after school. I don't know why they are like that. They themselves are not from here. They don't even have paperwork. We are here legally.

In their stories, all participants expressed that migrating and becoming refugees in another land was not something they chose. Refugee women are already vulnerable because of the prior migration experiences while fleeing for their lives, building a new life and meeting new challenges. They described experiencing prejudice and finding themselves in subordinate positions because of their gender, religious, and ethnic identities. This aligns with the literature on the experiences of refugees and racialization of their multiple identities (Ajrouch, 2005; Awad, 2010; Deacon & Sullivan, 2009; Hasan, Mitschke, & Ravi, 2018; Hynie, 2018; Jones, 2017). In addition, they described being subject to further marginalization for being refugees. These findings illuminate the intersectionality of identities as part of the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women.

### **Positive Feelings and Positive Interactions**

The process of cultural and psychological change, namely acculturation, as Berry (2005) suggests, happens in a long-term process which might take years, generations, or even centuries (Berry, 2005). As discussed in the literature, through culture shedding and culture learning (Berry, 1992) these processes might take place easily, but also may result in culture conflict and acculturative stress during social interactions. The findings indicate participants' positive feelings towards the dominant culture as well as the culture conflict, oppression, and marginalization they experience because of their intersecting identities. For example, Zainab mentioned she wouldn't go out or socialize with any Americans except for visiting the doctor's office for her girls. But she also told us that she feels very good whenever the American lady she knows from the clinic talks with her during her visits. Maryam shared her positive experiences and feelings as well. The American flag hung outside her apartment door, and the American ornaments they used for Ramadan celebration symbolized that they also accepted American culture and their new life. She confirmed that when she said,

I like it better than Jordan (their first relocation). We, as a family like it. You are not like...I mean you don't make a difference. We have a more like chance as anybody. We have all the chances that citizens born here.

Farah told us about a positive interaction she had when she went shopping. She told us,

One time I was walking at the mall. I saw this big guy. He was very big, like overweight. He looked at us, and I looked at him and smiled because it is not nice to just looking at people like that. He looked at us, I just smiled, and left. Then he

came back. He said “Selamun Aleykum.” He told us that he was in an Arab country. He was so happy telling us that he was overseas.

Farah also mentioned how she tries to connect with people,

I always initiate a smile. People if you stay far, they don't know you. People look at you with your hijab, and when you smile at them, you give them a reaction that I am not a bad person, here I am smiling to you.

Similarly, Lana, Aysha, and Marwa shared some of their interactions at work or out in public with people from the dominant society. But these interactions also appear to be more incidental than purposeful socialization as they would if they were taking part in an organization, participating in social events, gathering with American neighbors, or meeting American friends. The positive feelings and positive interactions seem to confirm that participants do have positive feelings about their lives and that they also experience positive interactions from time to time. However, the examples indicate that their participation in the dominant culture is limited to doctor's visits, interaction with a couple of colleagues, or talking to a few people they meet when they go shopping.

### **Hope and Future Aspirations**

Hope and future aspirations were among the main themes drawn from the stories of the participants. Their hope and plans for a better future for their kids played a significant role both in their decision to resettle in the U.S. and in the way, they have chosen to cope with the challenges faced during their acculturation process. Lana expressed that when she said, “I want a good life for my kids”. Maryam told us that providing kids with education was one of the main reasons to resettle in the U.S.

The narratives point to one commonality in their future aspirations: their desire to leave the U.S. for an Arab country or somewhere close to their motherland at some point in the future. Farah reflected on her plans:

I like it over here, but my sons will get busy with school, and I will stay with my husband. It is very boring. I would like to be with my family. I have nine grandchildren now. I want to be with them. Maybe when things get better in Jordan or Syria. Later, I would like to go back and forth.

“Inshallah” Marwa told us, “I would like to study and become a nurse. I will study, and I would like to go back to Turkey.”

Aysha sounded very determined when she talked about her plans about going back to an Arab country. She told us,

I don’t want to raise my kids in the U.S. I want to raise them in an Arabic country. I want to go back to an Arab country. When my kids are ten, seven or eight, when they can become, when they can know what is going on around them, they can learn the language and the culture.

But she also shared the hope and faith in herself and her God when she said, “We say, ‘you are like a plant, and God will put you somewhere, even in the desert you will get flowers’”. Thus, the women placed their hope in a better future.

### **Findings**

I identified six major themes related to the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women and the effects of their intersectional multiple identities on these experiences. A number of sub-themes help to understand their lived experiences from the beginning of the war to their current lives. The first theme, “towards the battle”,

emphasizes the ordinariness of their lives before the war. The participants' survival stories and how they felt in their transitions to their new lives after fleeing their homes stood out as one of the primary themes. The magnitude of the trauma they experienced during the war and fleeing for their lives, and its prolonged effects in their lives aligned with the literature on the severity of refugee experiences (Alpak et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2007).

The subthemes of loss, grief, fear of the unknown, and trauma were common experiences described under the second main theme "fleeing for life" for all participants. They described how it felt to have lost their country, land, home, belongings, family members, friends, and status. While they were trying to cope with the grief of loss, the trauma of all they had witnessed during the war, and the fear of an unknown future, they kept expressing their gratitude for having survived.

Similarly, participants described various challenges related to their new lives in the U.S., and these are grouped under the third major theme: A new life and new challenges. These challenges were a) language proficiency, b) insufficient financial support and cultural orientation, c) and lack of accessible public spaces in walking distance and mobility. The findings indicated that language played a big role in their acculturation processes specifically in the first months of resettlement. Since they could not speak English well, they choose to engage with their own ethnic community, speaking their native language rather than struggling to express themselves and integrate into the host society. Therefore, the study suggests that if refugees do not become proficient in the language of the dominant society, language presents a barrier to their inclusion, interaction, and participation. It becomes a structural problem that prevents

them from making use of existing support services (Crenshaw, 1991) and an important factor affecting acculturation experiences (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Ward & Kennedy, 1993a). In this study, lack of English proficiency seemed to cause separation of the participants from the dominant culture, even though the findings indicate that participants were interested in interaction with the members of the host society (Berry, 1997). Therefore, future research may consider comparing the experiences of educated, working women who are fluent in the English language and who have lived a longer period in the U.S.

The refugees also developed high expectations about their new lives in the U.S. before they arrived. Their disappointment regarding unmet expectations upon arrival coupled with the challenges of the resettlement process, such as the lack of cultural knowledge, no orientation to the life in the U.S., and lack of accessible social life and mobility.

Participants also articulated various acculturation experiences related to intersectionality. Their experiences indicated four intersecting subcategories of identities under the fourth major thematic category: Intersecting identities and acculturation preferences. The subcategories are: a) gender identity, b) religious identity, c) national, ethnic identity, and d) refugee status. Five of the six participants described experiences of subordination or distress regarding their intersecting identities. One participant, Zainab, who did not mention any subordination or experiences of oppression, had a very secluded life. Since she stayed home most of the time, she did not have to interact with anyone outside the circle of her family and Syrian friends. Her acculturation experiences were similar to what Awad (2010) suggested in her study of Arab Muslim Americans that less

dominant society immersion resulted in less perceived discrimination. Findings showed that being a woman in the U.S. liberates Muslim women in various ways related to adaptations in their gender roles such as going out alone without a male guardian, driving, being the primary contact for their kids at school, and going shopping alone or only with their kids. However, despite the changes they adapted, five of the six participants shared at least one experience of prejudice or subordination because of the intersectionality of being a Muslim woman, Arab, and a refugee.

In conclusion, similar to what the literature on refugee experiences (Bemak, Chung, & Pederson, 2003; Chung, 2001; UNHCR, 2016) emphasized, refugee women in this study also told us about having been burdened by war and pre-migration experiences. They have been coping with the challenges of a new life while they are trying to position themselves in a new culture and country having lost their previous social status in their motherland. As women, their religious identity is also more visible than Muslim men's, and they experience prejudice and marginalization because of being Muslim and Arab as reflected in their daily interactions with neighbors, at school, in the workplace, and in public spaces. For example, Aysha said that her hijab was one reason she could not get beyond the interviews in many jobs for which she applied. She told us that she was invited to job interviews, but her Muslim identity stood out, as she wears the hijab. She said, "It is difficult to find a job, but to find a job with hijab is harder". Aysha also told us about incidents that happened at work because of the prejudice towards her refugee and Muslim woman identity. In one incident, a client told her to leave the country and said that she did not belong there. Similarly, Lana could not even start a conversation with her neighbor when she intended to interact with her, because her neighbor immediately

distanced herself from her when she wanted to introduce herself. Lana told us that experience made her feel “very little and shamed”. Lana thinks people are scared of them as they consider Syrians as terrorists. Marwa was questioned about having to wear hijab at school and felt prejudice towards her Muslim and refugee identities at the workplace. She told us that her colleagues would avoid talking to her because she is a refugee and a Muslim. Marwa also said that she noticed Mexican Americans would avoid talking or greeting her in public.

The effects of these intersecting subordinations on the acculturation experiences is crucial to understand the power relationships among social groups (Warner and Shields, 2013). At the socio-structural level, the intersecting identities may result in further marginalization in terms of their legal status, resources, and social needs of individuals (Warner and Shields, 2013) which is also aligned with what Fatima, the interpreter of this study, mentioned when I interviewed her. Fatima works as a case manager for refugee families in a resettlement program where she helps refugee families to access resources such as Medicaid or food stamps. I asked Fatima to tell me about her experiences working with Muslim refugee women. She told me about some discriminatory incidents that she witnessed and experienced as a Muslim woman herself who also wears a hijab doing her job. For example; Fatima told me that when she does not introduce herself as a case manager, showing her badge, social workers would not even look at the papers of the refugees, but told her that they are not eligible for the benefits. In such cases, Fatima said she would either show her badge and introduce herself as a case manager or ask for a supervisor. She also mentioned her encounters with social security officers who were unwilling to serve refugees or who would complain about refugees not working but

benefiting from all the resources. Aysha and Marwa as the only two working women among the participants also indicated having been marginalized and experiencing prejudice at the workplace for being a Muslim woman and a refugee.

Participants also reported having positive feelings about living in the U.S. and some positive interactions with members of the host community. However, the findings indicate that those experiences are not beyond random, daily interactions with some people from a department store or at a hospital. Among the participants, only Aysha and Marwa mentioned having a couple of American friends. Aysha explained that her friends were from the resettlement welcome team, and she described her relationship as “keeping in touch with them”. For Marwa, lack of friendship was one of the biggest difficulties she experienced. Despite the opportunities that a work and a school environment would provide them to socialize and build a relationship with people from the host community, Marwa and Aysha did not mention actively participating in community events or having a social life and friendship that involved persistent social interaction with people from the host community. Therefore, findings point out that even though participants have some positive interactions with people from their surroundings, they are not actively involved in the host community to build relationship or friendship.

Lastly, evident from the last major theme “hope and future aspirations” that participants ultimately wish to go back to a country where they would feel more accepted and embraced, or they could be with their extended families. Their positive feelings about living in the U.S. can be attributed to their gratitude for being alive and safe; having more opportunities for their kids; and becoming more independent as women than having bonding relationships, friendships with people, or commitments in the host community.

The findings of the study suggest that intersectionality in different attributes of their lives greatly influence their social relationships and determine the level of their participation in the dominant society, thus acculturation experiences.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Five examined the themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' stories and interpretations of key findings. The primary source of data was the interviews. The researcher's journal and field notes were another important data source. During the data analysis, reading field notes and my journal let me return to the observations and reflections I made in the data collection process. The field notes and my journal included my observations, the descriptive notes on participants' nonverbal behaviors, context, and my reflections on their stories. The combination of my field notes with my journal that comprised of my field experiences created a reflective balance.

The major themes and subthemes identified in the study described the participants' acculturation experiences and how these experiences were informed by the intersecting multiple identities. The themes included: a) Towards the battle, b) Feeling for life, c) A new life, new challenges, d) Intersecting identities and acculturation preferences, e) Positive feelings and positive interactions, and f) Hope and future aspirations. These themes consist of several subthemes that further explained the qualities of their experiences and the intersectionality of their identities. The discussion, implications for theory and practice, limitations and delimitations of the study, and recommendations for future directions are discussed in the following chapter.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

“Peace at Home, Peace in the World.”- M. K. Atatürk

The purpose of this study was to investigate the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women living in the U.S. since 2011. Specifically, the research aimed to explore the intersectionality of nationality, gender, religion, and refugee status in their acculturation process. The study was guided by two bodies of literature: Acculturation theory (Berry, 1989; Berry, 1997; Berry 2003), and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989).

This concluding chapter includes discussion of the findings, implications for theory and practice, limitations and delimitations of the study, and areas for future research.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The Participants helped me answer the first research question, what are the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S., by telling me the story of their ordinary lives in Syria. Next, they detailed their experiences at the beginning of the war, how they found themselves in the middle of the battle and fled their country. They narrated their migration and resettlement process and elaborated several challenges and heartbreaking moments they encountered throughout that journey. Major themes I identified in their stories (as described in Chapter V) include the following: a) towards the battle, b) fleeing for life, c) a new life and new challenges, d) intersectionality of multiple identities and acculturation preferences, e) positive feelings and positive interactions, and f) hope and future aspirations.

The participants' pre-migration experiences comprised subthemes of loss, fear of the unknown, grief and sadness, and trauma. These experiences are in line with the literature on refugee experiences (Bemak, Chung, Pederson, 2013; LeMaster et al., 2018; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), which suggests that premigration factors strongly affect refugee mental health and acculturation experiences. In this study, participants portrayed themselves as traumatized, depressed, and sad because of the war. Their stories indicate that fleeing home; losing their house, relatives, belongings, land, and the country to which they belong, left them with a confusing, disorienting gap (Papadopoulos, 2002). These experiences make refugees the most disadvantaged group among relocated people (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001).

It is important to understand that unlike immigrants or sojourners, refugee migration is involuntary. Therefore, they are often unprepared for the cultural transition and mostly ill-equipped with resources such as language proficiency, financial support, or skills to handle their new lives (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). In this study, language proficiency, insufficient financial support and cultural orientation, and lack of accessible social spaces and mobility were among the challenges that participants elaborated. These barriers are types of subordination that they experience in their lives. Evident from the findings that a language barrier; "like a big stone" as Zainab described, prevents refugee women not only from engaging in relationships with people from the host culture, but also defending and expressing themselves when they encounter prejudice and marginalization as in examples of Aysha and Marwa (described in Chapter V).

The findings of the study that point out the lack of accessible public spaces in walking distance and mobility also align with the experiences of other refugee and immigrant groups (Bose, 2014; Mitschke et al., 2011; Uteng, 2009). Issues of accessibility and transportation are addressed in research under the frame of transport inequality (Clifton & Lucas, 2004; Lucas, 2006), as well as transport related social exclusion (Uteng, 2009). Lana and Farah echoed the literature when they described feeling secluded from life as they could not drive and lived far from people and communities. The research shows that limited mobility has adverse effects on immigrant and refugee lives as it prevents access to employment and healthcare services, participation in orientation programs (Neidell & Waldfogel, 2009; Mitschke et al., 2011), and immigrant socialization (Miller & Rasco, 2004; Shen Ryan, 1992). In contrast to the voluntary immigrants who relocate because of family reunification or economic opportunities, refugees do not decide the location of resettlement by themselves. It is directed by state resettlement agencies (Haines, 2010). After resettlement, refugees may choose to relocate but then, they face the problem of affordability (Haines, 2010).

In this study, four of the participants reflected on living far from people, stores, and community. They mentioned feeling isolated and challenged in their daily lives. For example, Farah told us that it was very difficult for them when they had to take a bus to join the Eid prayers and find somewhere to eat when they were fasting during the Ramadan month. The findings indicate that refugee women experience social exclusion because of where they live. At the same time, they experience disadvantages due to the language barrier and pre-migration experiences. These findings reveal patterns of subordination that intersect in the acculturation experiences of refugee women.

Crenshaw (1991) posits that,

Intersectional subordination need not be intentionally produced; in fact, it is frequently the consequence of the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment. (p. 1249)

The findings spoke to Crenshaw's intersectionality theory as those disadvantaged positions intersect with further types of subordination that participants experience for being Syrian, Muslim, Arab, and refugee women. The study investigated these types of subordinations through addressing the second research question: How does the intersectionality of their nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status influence their acculturation to the U.S.?

Cole (2009) suggests that separate analyses of these identity categories would be inadequate to understand the experiences of individuals with multiple disadvantaged statuses, as these categories are experienced all at once. Since September 11, 2001 (Ajrouch, 2005; Peek, 2005) and recently, with the discriminatory executive orders by the U.S. government such as the Muslim ban (CAIR, 2018), Muslims living in America, specifically women, have become more vulnerable and susceptible to Muslim bias incidents and religious discrimination (Benson, 2014; ISPU, 2018). Muslim women are subject to religious discrimination more than men because of being more visible with their religious attire (hijab). Thus, discrimination against Muslims can be considered a gendered phenomenon that particularly affects women (Benson, 2014).

As the literature suggests, in terms of nationality and refugee status, Syrian refugees experience negative, unwelcoming, and hostile attitudes globally (Koc &

Anderson, 2018). Moreover, discrimination towards Syrian refugees has been supported by President Donald Trump, who proposed to ban Syrian refugee admission to the U.S. in 2016 during his presidential campaign (Jones, 2017). This ongoing prevalent discriminating atmosphere resonates in the findings of this study as well. While some participants told of incidents that involved prejudice and marginalization in some of their interactions with people from the host community, some expressed fear of such encounters when they go outside of their homes, even though they have not yet personally experienced such discriminating or marginalizing events. It is evident from the participants' stories that there are "intersecting conditions of subordination" (LaBarbera, 2013, p. 189) because of those multiple disadvantaged, marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Warner & Shields, 2013) that these women experience in their acculturation process.

Berry (2005) suggests that the degree of contact, cultural knowledge, and positive interaction are considered indicative of sociocultural adaptation. In this study, participants indicated that they seek daily interaction with people from the host community. For example, Farah mentioned looking people in the eye to initiate interaction and show that people should not be afraid of her. Likewise, Lana tried to introduce herself to her neighbor and build a relationship with her. Participants also articulated being content with their lives in general. They reflected on the advantages of living in the U.S. such as the provision of a safe environment, providing education and opportunities for kids, and being liberated as women. Most notably, participants shared how they started to reinterpret some of their gender roles. They became more independent from their husbands. They started to experience life outside the home

differently than they used to in Syria as they are no longer segregated from men in public. They began to go out by themselves, drive, and contribute to the household by taking care of some errands outside the home. However, it is important to emphasize that despite their positive attitudes towards living in the U.S. and adjustments they had made in their daily lives, none of the participants mentioned being involved in any social activities or relationships with people from the host country. Their main community included only Syrians and Arabs. The last major theme, hopes and future aspirations, also support these findings with three of the participants planning to leave the U.S. in the future for a country with a similar cultural and religious background as theirs.

Acculturation is an ongoing process that continues as long as culturally different groups are in contact (Berry, 2005). In this study, participants had been in the U.S. for three years. The findings show that at the time of this study, participants' personal exposure and involvement in structural arrangements or positions of power have been relatively limited. These findings would differ in the long term if they were to get involved in social relationships, take part in different domains of life, and get to know more people and build relationships in the host community. However, even with the limited contact and relationships, all participants shared some experiences of prejudice and marginalization.

In conclusion, the study posits that without the consideration of the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status, the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women would have been obscured. In this study, embracing an intersectionality lens allowed me to explore the limitations and demands in the social structures that affected the options and opportunities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009)

these Syrian Muslim refugee women experienced in their acculturation process. While indicating the complexities of their acculturation process, the findings reveal the intersecting relations of types of subordination in their experiences.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

This study has implications for theory in acculturation literature as it bridges the intersectionality and acculturation theories by having explored the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women through the lens of both theories. Although acculturation literature includes studies that point out the effects of different variables such as ethnic identity, religion, and sojourner status on acculturation experiences of immigrants (Amer & Hovey, 2007; Faragallah, Schumm, & Webb, 1997; Semaan, 2015), not much is known about the intersectionality of those various variables or identities in relation to acculturation experiences of refugees. Using intersectionality theory can enable researchers to investigate domination, subordination, and privilege in interpersonal social relationships, as well as in the structural systems that deliver services, resources, and social recognition; and in practices of bureaucracy (Dill & Zambrana, 2009).

Second this study expands the acculturation literature by focusing on Syrian Muslim refugee women as the survivors of a very recent global conflict. Such experiences have not been extensively studied yet. The outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 has been one of the biggest factors in the global refugee crisis by producing the largest number of displaced people in the world (Edwards, 2017). This study contributes to the lack of research (Sheikh & Anderson, 2018) on Syrian refugees.

Third, the study expands the literature of adult education by contributing to the current discourse on race, religion, gender, immigration, and specifically honoring the voices that need to be heard. Adult education programs serve a diverse group of immigrants, asylees, and refugees among other adult learners (Schaetzel & Young, 2010). When the foundational stance that adult educators take on social justice, equity, and diversity is considered, it is essential to point out the complexity and intersectionality in the lives of refugee women. By using intersectionality theory in this study, I aim to help refugee women's voices be heard and their lived experiences to be acknowledged. Since 2016, more than half of the U.S. governors have delivered disapproving statements on the resettlement of Syrian refugees in their states (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Besides the current political atmosphere that promotes legal challenges for the Syrian refugees, the results of a recent American Muslim Pool report (ISPU, 2018) shows an increase in religious discrimination towards Arab Muslim women living in the U.S. in previous years. In this study, almost all participants described feeling oppressed and marginalized because of their intersecting, multiple marginalized identities such as being a Muslim woman, being Syrian, and being a refugee all at once. Therefore, by adding to our understanding of refugee experiences, the study contributes to one of the major populations adult educators serve.

This study has potential practice implications for refugee resettlement centers, NGO's, community centers, government organizations, and adult educators that help refugees' transition to their host countries and provide adult education programs. The findings of the study indicate that refugee women need more support and encouragement to access and benefit from the available resources such as adult ESL and literacy

programs offered by public schools, community or government programs. Adult educators in these organizations and programs can create awareness of refugee acculturation experiences and intersectionality in society.

This study informs adult educators about the pre-migration and acculturation experiences of refugee learners and the challenges they go through because of their intersecting identities in their daily lives. In this study, out of six participants, only two of them could speak English fluently. Only one participant is still enrolled in an ESL program. Other participants mentioned having responsibilities at home that prevent them from continuing with the classes. The organizations and programs can develop strategies to better engage refugee women; organize support groups and provide an interactive social environment that could increase persistence and participation in their orientation and education programs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was limited to a small number of Syrian Muslim refugee women in a city in Texas. Therefore, the experiences cannot represent the entire population of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. Texas is among the three states that host the largest number of Syrian refugees in the U.S. Since acculturation is a mutual process between the host and the resettled communities, acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women might differ in cities or states that host a smaller number of Syrian refugees. Likewise, the variety of community resources they might access or not access could differ depending on where they are resettled.

Another limitation was the English proficiency criteria for the participant selection. In this study, English mastery at an intermediate or advanced level was

originally planned to be one criterion for the participant selection. However, only one participant was fluent in English at that level among the participants of the study. Due to the difficulty of recruiting participants with an intermediate level of English proficiency, I had to conduct interviews in Arabic. Therefore, I had an Arabic to English interpreter present with me in four of the interviews. One of the participants was fluent in Arabic as well as Turkish which is my native language. I interviewed her in Turkish upon her decision to participate. The interpreter was still present in this interview in case we needed her. The experiences and acculturation choices of those who could not speak any English or could speak only some English would undoubtedly be different from those who have a good command of English. In this study, only two of the participants had an occupation. Four of them were housewives. Experiences of working refugee women would no doubt be different than those who are stay-at-home mothers. The two working women had had more diverse experiences than the others since they had to interact with relatively more people and engage in the host community.

Finally, the use of a translator was a limitation of the study due to the issues of representation that might have resulted from the translator's perspective (Temple & Young, 2004). The potential problems of translation were minimized by choosing a translator who works with this specific population in the same context. The translator also came from a similar cultural and ethnic background.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Delimitations refer to the boundaries and limits that are pre-determined to define the scope of the study. The purpose of the study was to investigate the acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women who resettled in the U.S. after 2011 Syrian

war. Specifically, the study aimed to explore the intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status. Therefore, the study was delimited to participants who were Syrian, Muslim, and refugee women resettled in the U.S. after 2011 Syrian war.

This study was a cross-language qualitative study. As a researcher, I speak an advanced level of English. Since, the native language of the participants of this study was Arabic, the interviews were conducted with an interpreter. Hence, another delimitation was to choose an interpreter with some cultural knowledge and understanding of refugee resettlement context. The interpreter of the study was a native Arabic speaker who was also fluent in English. She was a case manager at a church-based organization that had a refugee and immigrant resettlement program. She was also a Muslim immigrant woman from a neighboring country to the participants' country of origin. So, she understood the context of the study and the culture of the study participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study addresses the gap in the literature regarding the lived experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women who came to the U.S. after the Syrian War in 2011. It provides a deeper understanding of refugee women's experiences by drawing attention to the complexities and difficulties of their life. It is valuable in the way it emphasizes the effects of intersecting identities on refugee acculturation experiences. The study informs us about the feelings, specific needs, and expectations of refugee women in the U.S. and points out the intersectionality of nationality, gender, religion and refugee status on their acculturation experiences. However, given the current political rhetoric in depicting immigrant presence in the U.S., further research is needed in order to gain a broader understanding of these experiences and intersectionality in different domains of their

lives. As reported in the limitations section, in this study, not all the women participate in the work force. Additionally, all participants reported experiencing a language barrier. When the duration of stay in the U.S. (3 years) is considered, future researchers may examine how intersectionality affects acculturation experiences in the long term among educated, working, and English-speaking Muslim refugee women.

The study findings also indicate that refugee women do not thoroughly benefit from the available resources, persist in language classes or take part in social activities provided by the resettlement agencies or other organizations. The challenges they reported such as lack of accessibility and mobility, and responsibilities at home point out the effects of living conditions, culture, and motivation on their desire and persistence for participating in programs and utilizing the available services. A couple of participants mentioned they had short orientations when they arrived. Since language and lack of a support system are among the challenges they reported, the findings from the current study could be extended in the future studies to investigate how to provide better support to refugee women and encourage and motivate them to participate and persist in education programs. Further research may also investigate how we can make ESL classes, orientation programs, and other support services culturally relevant and more accessible for refugee women.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### Appendix A: Informed Consent

**Study Title:** Acculturation experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S.: Intersectionality of nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status.

**Principal Investigator:**

Merih Ugurel Kamisli

**Email:** m\_u30@txstate.edu

**Phone:** 5129096398

**Co-Investigator/Faculty Advisor:**

Ann K. Brooks

**Email:** abrooks@txstate.edu

**Phone:** 512-245-1936

This consent form explains why we are doing this research and inviting you to participate. It describes what we will ask you to do, and the risks or discomforts that might come. Please ask questions at any time. If you decide to participate, we will give you a copy of this form to keep.

#### PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

You are invited to be a part of this study on the experiences of Syrian Muslim refugee women in the U.S. We want to learn how nationality, religion, gender, and refugee status matter. We also want to learn how refugee women adapt to the U.S. What we learn could help improve resettlement programs for refugees. You are being invited to join because you are a Syrian Muslim refugee woman who resettled in the U.S. since 2011 (after the break in the war).

#### PROCEDURES

If you agree, I will ask you to complete up to two interviews. The second interview will happen if I need to clarify or follow up on something from the first interview. You can decide on a date, time and location best for you. Each interview will last about 45-60 minutes. During the interview, you will talk about your experiences in the U.S. I will audio-record your answers and take notes. If you do not want to be recorded, I will only take notes.

#### RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

If any questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are free to skip them. You can stop participating at any time. If you feel discomfort afterwards, you can contact the Center for Survivors of Torture's program. The program has free Mental Health Services for refugees. They are at 9415 Burnet Road #201 Austin, TX 78758. Phone: (512)358-4612. Open Monday to Friday, 9:00-6:00 p.m.

#### BENEFITS/ALTERNATIVES

There will be no direct benefit to you if you participate. You might benefit from sharing your stories with someone from the Middle East. I grew up in Adana, near the Syrian border, and I know about Syrian culture and people. Learning about your experiences

might also help improve programs for refugee women.

### **EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY**

Reasonable efforts will be made to keep your personal information private and confidential. I will not ask you for any personal identifiers (name, surname, birth date, address, etc.). Any identifiable information will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The members of the research team, the Texas State University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) may access the data. The ORC monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

Your name will not be used in any reports or publications. Data will be kept for three years (per federal regulations) after the study is completed and then destroyed.

### **PAYMENT/COMPENSATION**

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

### **PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY**

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You can skip any questions you do not want to answer. You can stop participating at any time without losing benefits, programs, or other services or rights.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Principal Investigator, Merih Ugurel Kamisli, phone: 5129096398, [m\\_u30@txstate.edu](mailto:m_u30@txstate.edu)

This project was approved by the Texas State IRB on [date]. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB Chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 – ([dgobert@txstate.edu](mailto:dgobert@txstate.edu)) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 - ([meg201@txstate.edu](mailto:meg201@txstate.edu)).

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself, your background, and your family.
2. How long have you been to the U.S.?
3. Do you identify with or practice any religious or spiritual philosophy? If so, please describe.
4. How do you describe your identity? Middle Eastern/ Syrian/ Syrian Arab / Arab
5. Please tell me about your life in Syria before the Syrian Civil War in 2011.
6. Tell me about your experiences of the war as much as you are comfortable.
7. In what ways has the war influenced/transformed you or your life?
8. Tell me about your decision to come to the U.S. How did that feel?
9. What kind of challenges have you experienced during your displacement and resettlement process?
10. What were your expectations about living in the U.S.?
11. Describe your experiences with the first Americans you met in the United States
12. Tell me about your experiences of differences in the U.S. culture.
13. Could you tell me any changes in your behaviors since living in the United States?
14. How do you feel about living in the U.S.?
15. How would you describe your present experiences in the U.S.?
16. Have you participated in a language program upon your arrival to the U.S.?
17. How do you feel about speaking in English? What are your experiences of speaking a foreign language?
18. What does it mean to identify as a (insert the participants identification for her ethnic identity) woman?
19. How does it differ on a daily basis or depending on the situation or the social environment?
20. What are your experiences of being a (insert the participant's identification for herself) woman in the U.S.? How does it differ from being that person in Syria?
21. What challenges and obstacles have you encountered as a (insert the participant's identification of herself) woman in the U.S.?

22. Have you experienced any challenges because of your culture, gender roles, religion, or family?
23. Describe any situations in which you might perceive discrimination?
24. How has identifying as a woman with multiple identities (e.g. Syrian, Muslim, refugee) and the interaction of these identities influence your adaptation, or experiences? How does it challenge you? How does it benefit you?

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