

# Listening in Arabic

## Feminist Research with Syrian Refugee Mothers

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**Abstract:** This article reflects upon three developments emergent from a feminist approach in research with Syrian newcomer mothers in Toronto, Canada. First, a feminist approach shapes how the authors build their research team and facilitate internal meetings as a diverse, multigenerational group open to learning from others. Second, a feminist approach requires that the authors center mothers' words through the critical practice of ensuring shared Arabic language and local knowledge in the research process. The authors offer excerpts in Arabic and English from participants' narratives to describe how giving nuance to multiple forms of expression is key to a feminist practice of translation. Third, the authors describe how this approach opens their project to involve a range of participatory-action activities driven by the voices and desires of participants. The authors end by summarizing their ethical and methodological practices in light of inequalities at the intersection of citizenship status, class, nation, race, and other categories of asymmetrical power. These inequalities shape the authors' attempts to reorganize conventional participant-researcher and student-faculty dynamics in their work together.

In November 2015, a newly elected Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau began rolling out an ambitious "Rapid Impact" plan to resettle twenty-five thousand Syrian newcomers to Canada by the end of the year. Population-level data collected by the government suggested that resettled families would be entering with fewer resources and more severe challenges as compared to newcomers to Canada from other conflict

zones, or even as compared to those displaced by the Syrian war merely one year earlier (IRCC 2016). In partnership with thousands of private citizens, the Liberal plan represented a turbo-charged version of Canada's unique public-private refugee sponsorship policy, first introduced in 1979 to support newcomers from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.

Like others around the world, we were following news of the Syrian crisis closely. And like others in Canada, we were involved in individual and neighborhood-based fundraising efforts. Up to this point, the three of us who are faculty had maintained separate research agendas as colleagues in sociology at the University of Toronto and our coauthor, Laila, had recently joined our graduate program to begin master's coursework. Although we studied gender, im/migration/ethnicity, family, and social policy in our own ways, we had not yet incorporated the impacts of the Syrian war and the displacement of more than five million people into our sociological practice, and our personal commitments to supporting Syrian newcomers remained confined to work outside the university setting.

This changed when the federal Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship (IRCC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) announced a joint call for proposals to address the "Targeted Research: Syrian Refugee Arrival, Resettlement, and Integration" program.<sup>1</sup> The program aimed to "support research and mobilize knowledge in a timely way on key issues and events—such as *education, employment, skills development, social integration and security*—in the early days of the [Syrian] migration and resettlement process" (SSHRC 2016, emphasis added). Informed by feminist standpoint theory and practices, we knew that an important explanatory and critical lens into Canada's unique refugee regime was possible if the observations, insights, and narratives of newcomer *women*—and, in particular, *mothers*—were centered. We came together to draft a grant proposal for a one-year pilot study to shed light on mothers' wellness and mental health as they worked to resettle their children and families in their first year in Toronto. This would be achieved chiefly through two waves of interviews: one, within the first months of mothers' arrivals to Canada, and the second was targeted to take place just before "Month Thirteen," which represented the end of government or public-private sponsorship of the family. Our pilot project was funded by IRCC-SSHRC in August 2016 and an expanded version of our project is newly funded through 2023 by SSHRC and the Ontario Ministry of

Research, Innovation, and Science.<sup>2</sup> What follows below are our collective reflections on the developments that emerged from the pilot project.

### **Why Women? A Feminist Approach to Migration and Transnationalism**

The 2016 Rapid Impact call for proposals from IRCC-SSHRC and its androcentric focus on “key issues and events” like skills development and security is characteristic of mainstream scholarly and policy-oriented perspectives on migration, and in particular, the forced migration of Syrians and other racialized populations into Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> Gender was not prioritized or flagged as a phenomenon of interest to IRCC-SSHRC, nor was it suggested as a variable in a more superficial “add and stir” approach. Despite this, we proposed a project centered on the accounts of newcomer *women* in order to better understand some of the core migration and resettlement-related issues identified by IRCC-SSHRC. We based our decision to focus on women on two factors. First, the vast majority of newcomers to Canada via Rapid Impact were women and children. This gave us a unique window to understand resettlement issues from a gender perspective. Second, we were informed by feminist epistemological logic, as elaborated by Patricia Hill Collins (1991), Chandra Mohanty (1991), Sandra Harding (1993), and Ella Shohat (2001) that high-quality, critical research findings about dominant groups and their institutional beliefs and practices are generated by centering and listening to marginalized populations. In this way, primary mechanisms typically overlooked and undertheorized in traditionally macro-level analyses of processes like globalization and migration are in fact *only* revealed in black feminist, third world feminist, and transnational feminist research streams (Herr 2014).

Thus, in the case of the Rapid Impact call for proposals, we were compelled to ask how—across a migration process structured by nation-states and their relational and symbolic positions vis-à-vis one another (for example: Canada as benevolent safe harbor; Syria as conflict zone) and as interpolated by transnational actors such as the United Nations/UN High Commissioner for Refugees—centering Syrian women’s perspectives could offer “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) and key sightlines into these institutions and regimes. By focusing on what Mohanty has termed the “epistemic advantage” of standpoint third world feminism, we could generate different questions about resettlement in Canada from those posited by the call for proposals. For example, government data offering

a population-level profile of the first Rapid Impact Syrian refugees painted a relatively grim picture about the resources and challenges they were poised to navigate in Canada. Literacy levels of these newcomers—not only in English and French, but also in their native Arabic—were low, and they would be arriving to Canada with significant, unaddressed medical and dental needs (IRCC 2016). But centering women, and mothers in particular, required that we think differently about these challenges. As low-income, mostly rural women, these mothers had already navigated complex local and transnational processes on behalf of their families, despite barriers to basic medical care and education. As survivors of war, and at great risk to their lives, they had shepherded their children through step migration and refugee camps. What resources had these women drawn on to forge strong selves and families? What lessons did their particular experiences, strategies, and insights bring to bear on scholarship and policy generated by Canadian stakeholders?

Our choice to center newcomer *mothers* was duly informed by the work of feminist sociologists like Ginetta E. B. Candelario (2009), Kimberly Hoang (2013), Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2000), and Rhacel Parreñas (2009). Each has argued for a feminist approach to studying large-scale phenomena like international migration, racial ideologies, and social policy through the shifting relations of transnational mothers. Parreñas has articulated an especially strong stance on centering women and their mothering processes: “As a feminist, I believe that we can still study gender even by solely focusing on women. This is because when we speak about women’s gendered experiences, we are always already referring to men” (Parreñas 2009: 4). From these scholars’ contributions, we were confident that centering Syrian newcomer mothers would not only yield beneficial insights on how they themselves were faring, but also about the linked fates of their partners and children. In the pages that follow, we discuss three fundamental ways that the project’s feminist approach shaped our project.

### **Three Ways a Feminist Stance Shaped the Project**

#### *Assembling a Team and the Internal Organization of Our Meetings*

A first, fundamental shaping of the project as a feminist one meant empirically centering the accounts of Syrian newcomer mothers through assembling a team to empower their stories. This meant that our project was, as a matter of course, situated within ethical and methodological

obligations related to language and translation. In order to do justice to mothers' narratives, the project would require cultural and linguistic expertise, which in turn required us to spend our grant monies entirely on participant recruitment and Arabic-language fieldworker costs. In practical terms, women's long-form personal narratives would need to be elicited through collaborative, iterative, face-to-face work that could only be done in Arabic. Their narratives then needed to be translated into English for circulation among ourselves and the scholarly and governmental bodies that had funded the work and for political and epistemic transfer to feminist academics and activists who do and do not speak Arabic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given these significant start-up costs and methodological challenges, ours was one of a small handful of funded proposals that aimed to engage directly with Arabic-speaking refugees in their native language.<sup>4</sup> Bringing mothers' direct, original insights into the national conversation on Canadian resettlement was a politically and intellectually important motivation for our work. As recently urged in this journal, "Translation is politically and theoretically indispensable to forging feminist, pro-social justice, antiracist, postcolonial/decolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances and epistemologies" (Alvarez, Caldwell, and Lao-Montes 2016: v). But the research process also required another kind of feminist translation that was more difficult to achieve: social interactions and tangible resources that would be of use to the newcomer mothers and their families. In this way, participatory-action research (Whyte 1991; Fals Borda 2001) was an ideal but ultimately unattainable practice in most cases. We describe in the final section of this essay how we integrated aspects of participatory-action research with a small number of research participants, but in general, our approach resembled what Hondagneu-Sotelo has termed "advocacy research" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1993: 56). The only outcome we could modestly anticipate in an exploratory pilot study like ours was that results from our conversations with mothers could shed light on gaps, inequities, and possibilities for social action and change within resettlement processes.

As described above, at an early stage in the planning process it became clear that we would need to build a research team with key parameters in mind. Here, insights from the literature on Black feminisms, and in particular, Collins's pathbreaking theorization of domination as "interlocking systems of oppression" (Collins 1991: 222) required that we reorganize our epistemological assumptions and sociological practice with

interlocutors. As mothers and scholars based in Canada, we had to critically examine the idea of expertise and dispense with routine ideas about who would supervise, analyze, or know best in our partnership with newcomer participants, or with student research assistants. Neither Neda, Melissa, nor Ito spoke Arabic or had spent significant time in the Levant, although we had each come to Canada through a different migratory path. Neda was born and raised in the United States to parents who emigrated from Iran and now lives in Canada as a permanent resident while maintaining Iranian and U.S. citizenship. Melissa's grandmother emigrated from Damascus, Syria and her grandfather from Bishmizzine, Lebanon to the United States. She was born and lived in the United States before coming to Canada recently as a senior scholar. Ito was born in Taiwan and raised in Japan before she immigrated with her family to Canada as a teenager. She completed high school and undergraduate studies in Canada before leaving to the United Kingdom for her graduate studies, and spent the subsequent thirteen years working in Japan and the United Kingdom before returning to Canada as a senior scholar.

Given these privileges, which have shaped our experiences as mothers, women, and scholars in Canada, Mohanty's 1991 critique of essentialist notions of gender circulated by first world feminists and her formulation of third world feminism led us to consider how gender might operate as "political rather than biological or locational grounds for alliance" (quoted in McDowell 1993: 313). At the same time, key readings on Muslim feminisms have shown that projects like ours, which might fall under a global feminist banner, are regularly suffused with stereotypes about victimized Muslim women in need of saving from patriarchs in "Islamland" (Abu-Lughod 2002: 68; Mahmood 2005; Rinaldo 2013). By critically reflecting on our identities as women academics based in Canada, we had to acknowledge that despite being multilingual and from different racialized, national, and religious backgrounds, and despite our professional training and credentials, the insights and skills we could bring to this scholarly endeavor were lacking in significant ways. We certainly were not the experts on the Rapid Impact resettlement process that was being constructed, and in some cases, improvised in real time by the Canadian state. Crucially, we lacked cultural understandings that limited our ability to productively engage and interpret our interlocutors' narratives. And in a broader climate defined by geopolitical violence against Muslim women and communities, our project risked reproducing uncritical,

homogenizing, and Orientalist ideas about gender and power, particularly in the context of mothers' forced migration and resettlement.<sup>5</sup> We understood that we needed to seek partnership and guidance from others with different sightlines and knowledge.

Through referrals from colleagues and leaders in grassroots, Syrian-led resettlement efforts in the Toronto area, we expanded our research team in two ways. First, we recruited four early-career women scholars as paid research assistants (RAs). Each scholar was already enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Toronto and all are recent newcomers to Canada with backgrounds from different parts of the South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region: for example, Laila, our coauthor on this essay and a UNESCO Youth Forum participant, was born and raised in Egypt and moved to Canada in 2013 after having experienced the effects of the Arab Spring in Cairo.<sup>6</sup> The others are Rula Kahil (Education; Lebanon), Rasha Elendari (Archaeology; Syria), and Jessica Radin (Religious Studies; United States). Each RA possessed native or native-level fluency in Arabic and experience in SWANA-region refugee camp settings and Canadian resettlement efforts. Their inclusion on the team was not only essential for building trust and understanding with the newcomers with whom we had proposed to conduct research, but also to ensure that in advance of our outreach, discussions and negotiations among the team would anticipate and address, to the extent possible, issues that would complicate our research.

To begin, Ito, Melissa, and Neda consulted closely with Laila, Rula, Rasha, and Jessica in biweekly internal meetings held before we applied for research ethics board approval from our university (a rigorous, fraught process that could be the subject of its own reflexive essay). In these meetings, we intensely vetted research design- and content-related matters against the RAs' local knowledge as recent newcomers and cultural insiders. This included soliciting and incorporating their critiques on drafts of our interview instrument, consent process and materials, appropriate forms of honoraria, and various health-related supports and resources that we were ethically and professionally bound to offer to participants. Following ethics approval, the meetings became a place for RAs to discuss what they found profound, curious, or puzzling from their interviews with mothers, and for all of us to collectively learn from the patterns that emerged out of mothers' narratives. Moreover, the meetings became a space for our group to process the arduous and moving emotional

journeys of the respondents, and occasionally of the team members as well. The more that we moved in, out, and across various methodological and substantive material in our team meetings, identities that cut across our team like mother/daughter, Arab/not-Arab, Muslim/not-Muslim were salient.

Second, following the incorporation of graduate student RAs, we had institutional capacity to bring three more early-career scholars onto the team: Mohammed Ali Kala (an undergraduate student recently arrived from Syria as part of the Rapid Impact program); Anmul Shafiq (an undergraduate student who moved as a teenager to Canada from Libya); and Mohamed Afify (an undergraduate student, born in Toronto to parents from Egypt). They sought out our project as a way of extending their involvements in post-2015 resettlement efforts and we were enriched by their work as researchers and our copresenters at scholarly conferences.

The meetings, which continued throughout the course of the year-long pilot, were an intentional convening of our expanding, multigenerational team. The inclusion of Syrian and Arab-heritaged researchers was one modest effort to address what critical migration scholars and sociologists like Rawan Arar have described as the importance of “bearing witness” to refugee experiences through “varied perspectives” (Arar 2017). In Arar’s case, the perspective of Jordanian humanitarian workers offers a vital counter to research on the “Syrian refugee crisis” generated by and for Western audiences. We extend from Arar’s case to incorporate the perspectives of seven early-career researchers who share what she describes as “geographical, cultural, linguistic, and religious commonalities” with project participants (Arar 2017). This organizational approach, inspired by feminist and critical research practices, created spaces for the most junior members of the team to be powerful contributors.

In the next sections of this essay, we describe several of the major, recurring challenges related to the research process discussed in our meetings. Notably, although the project initially focused on the stressors mothers experienced in integrating children into schools and communities, our interview guide began with each mother narrating her migration journey and our analytic foci broadened in turn. These stories were extensive, deep, and often eclipsed the focus on children’s integration. Moreover, the other stressors in mothers’ lives influencing their mental health went beyond children, and thus their stories and the thematic scope of our second wave of questions widened.



SHARED IDENTITIES AND THE CHALLENGE OF TRAUMA IN RESEARCH  
WITH SYRIAN NEWCOMER MOTHERS

In preparation for “entering the field” it was important for our research team to initiate conversations about best practices.<sup>7</sup> Karen Jacobsen and Loren Landau (2003) and Dina Birman (2006) discuss several important ethical and methodological rules for conducting interviews with members of a displaced population, which may not necessarily be applicable to members of other groups. First, the RAs helped remind us that researchers need to be aware that members of such populations are very often in a vulnerable position and have spent numerous days filing forms, answering questions, having their backgrounds investigated or confirmed, and so on. Often interviewees have not been properly briefed on what the goals of a research project are and how they can contribute to it, which we too noted in our own participant/interviewer interactions in Wave 1: participants were sometimes reluctant to move forward with the interview and sought information about the benefits of participation or reassurance about why the interview would be audio recorded. In the case of the mothers with whom we worked, many remained concerned about the authoritarian regimes under which they lived, and believed they may be arrested or harmed by authorities if they expressed their opinions (Yu and Lieu 1986). This lack of trust in or fear of government (which we likely represented to some) was observed during some interviews, either because participants explicitly expressed fear or because of the reactions some questions produced.

To counterbalance some of the challenges in eliciting mothers’ narratives, or even in recruiting them to the project in the first place, we noticed that RAs inductively drew on their own identities as entry points in their interactions with the refugee mothers.<sup>8</sup> By talking about her own experiences as a mother and newcomer to Canada, for example, Rula was able to quickly build rapport, which allowed for the interviews to run smoothly and helped the participants be more at ease when sharing their stories. Below, Rula shares a small detail about her own everyday resettlement practice that elicited recognition and further elaboration from a participant:

**Pr:** It is a personal matter. . . . You miss your family; you miss your life. So you start to think about it. Sometimes, I forget about it. But other times, I remember. *One word* can remind you . . . that you lost all this. So you get depressed. . . . Then life goes on. And you see your

kids. . . . You see that you are [working on] securing their future.

That is what makes up for this [pain].

**Rula:** So when you feel this way, what do you usually do?

**Pr:** I listen to music! [laughing]

**Rula:** Sometimes, when I listen to music, it reminds me even more [of my hometown].

**Pr:** Sometimes, you choose the music that puts you even more in this sad mood. [laughing]

In order to make the interview process as comfortable as possible, and to encourage participants to share their stories, Rula and the other RAs intuitively shared information about themselves, being sincere about their own experiences and vulnerabilities. Of course, it was also crucial that interviewers asked open-ended questions and gave participants the time to express themselves. The RAs also had to be very sensitive, empathetic, and reactive to participants' answers—a dynamic that was sometimes the subject of debate among team members. Was there an appropriate amount of empathy to show that would honor the interaction between participant and interviewer without harming interpersonal trust or stalling the research process? Were there strategies that RAs could or even should use to manage their own emotional reactions? Best practices in qualitative research generally hold that interviewers should ask questions and wait for the interviewee to answer before interjecting or reacting, in order to avoid influencing his or her answer in any way. However, in the case of this project, it was difficult for interviewers to simply remain silent while listening to participants express suffering and trauma. The following excerpt from Rula's first interview with a participant—where the interview was temporarily suspended—was discussed at length by the team at one of our meetings:

**Rula:** So what do you miss most in your country?

**P3:** My parents. [begins crying]

**Rula:** Of course. . . . And I'm sure they miss you too. Do you call them?

[Pause. Still crying (00:03)]

**Rula:** I'm sorry . . .

[Silence (00:10)]

**Rula:** I should have told you that some of the questions might elicit some pain.<sup>9</sup>

[Silence (00:14) Sighs]

**Rula:** Do you talk with them?

**P3:** Alhamdulillah. Yes, I do.

The mothers in our study wept most often in interviews as soon as the subject of their own mothers and fathers came up. Due in significant part to the exclusion of most non-nuclear families in Syrian resettlement in Canada, they had been separated from parents and other extended kin who were central in helping to raise their children in Syria.<sup>10</sup> As suggested by the excerpt above, it is extremely challenging for the interviewer to stick to the questionnaire and remain silent when sitting across from a participant who recalls tragic experiences and appears to suffer from trauma. We felt it crucial for our interviewers to at once demonstrate patience and wait for participants to speak while remaining responsive to their answers. In our team meeting, Rula described that in the moment she felt pressure to stick to the interview guide and ultimately felt guilty about having steered the participant back to the questionnaire. Collectively, and based in relevant literature, we agreed that project participants should not be pushed and for interviewers to be empowered to make dynamic and trauma-informed determinations about how to shift or let go of the conversation, if need be.

Another issue that arose in team meetings was the need for interviewers to pay attention to how they formulated questions so that they were culturally sensitive to the mothers' senses of self and dignity. For example, the interviewers were quickly reminded that the topic of marital relationships was a very sensitive one and that gendered power dynamics may in fact intervene in a mother's participation or nonparticipation in the study. In the case of one participant, her husband was vocally resistant to the idea of her participation in the project, even joking to interviewer Jessica: "I do everything with the kids—you should be interviewing me!" Jessica found that she needed to suspend the typical protocol in favor of talking with both husband and wife in order to put them both at ease before returning to the interview.<sup>11</sup>

Gendered interactions like this were, in some cases, a strain on trust and may have constrained or negatively shaped an interviewer's ability to elicit mothers' full narratives or disclosures. In other cases, it may have established further rapport between the women, as we saw in some interviews, where both participant and interviewer would later share

a good-humored, private giggle in homosocial space. To wit, we noticed that the physical space where the interview was conducted influenced the content and tenor of the conversation. Half of our participants were involved in English courses organized by a local resettlement agency and the interviews with these mothers were conducted on-site, in the break room of the facility. The other half were recruited through chain-referral sampling, with interviews conducted either in mothers' own kitchens and living rooms or, in a few cases, neighborhood cafes.

All of these features help explain how our Wave 1 interviews could be characterized as mothers processing war- and migration-related trauma and loss, with most also offering broad reflections on their lives before resettlement in Canada. These initial interviews thus became a space for participants to speak, weep, mourn, and share their thoughts and sometimes laughter with a fellow Arabic speaker. When mothers were approached to participate in a second round of interviews, the majority of mothers agreed to continue on with us and resumed their interviews with a degree of rapport and trust built in Wave 1. In Wave 2, however, three hard realities of Canadian resettlement became more apparent in the mothers' narratives: household financial constraints and mothers' emergent desires to contribute financially, especially in light of their husbands' unemployment; their children's difficulties at school; and the challenges of learning English.

### *Centering Mothers' Words through Shared Arabic Language and Knowledge*

A second way that a feminist approach shaped our project involved centering mothers' language, and by extension, grappling with the politics of translation. Giving nuance to multiple forms of expression is key to a feminist practice of translation. Thus, following the completion of our Arabic interviews, the next major phase of the project revolved around transcribing and simultaneously translating interviews from Arabic to English. This process presented several methodological challenges that are necessary to discuss in relation to the difficulty of conducting sociological work across diverse cultural and linguistic field settings. If, as in the humanities, we are to think about translation as an "art form," it is also crucial to acknowledge how translators make decisions about what and how to translate, which words to keep in the original language and why, and how to keep the voice of the participant "alive" in two languages, all the while attempting to

remain faithful to the original text (in this case, the mothers' audio-recorded narratives). Keeping alive mothers' meanings through translation was a central value and goal of our project.

#### TRANSLATION AS "ART FORM" VERSUS "ACCOUNT"

In conventional presentations of language, the "invisibility" of a translator and her additional efforts to make the translated text "flow," seem "natural," or "not translated" are understood as necessary. Commonly, "invisibility" is understood as "fluency." In the translation of literary texts, "a fluent translation is written in English that is current ('modern') instead of archaic, widely used instead of specialized ('organization'), and standard instead of colloquial ('slangy'). Foreign words ('pidgin') are avoided." (Venuti 1995: 4). However, technical or social-scientific translations cannot and do not necessarily follow the same rules. In other words, for technical and social-scientific texts, focusing on an "account" may be more fruitful and is, in fact, *pro forma* in qualitative sociological research.

If we transfer the idea of an account to the translation of narrative interviews in sociology, ensuring flow may not be appropriate for qualitative research, though it may be for literary work. More specifically, because our interviews were two-way, verbal interactions, there were many pauses, interjections, instances of weeping, and audible interruptions by small children and others in the background. In other words, our feminist centering allowed us to see the interview process itself as a naturalistic setting that cannot be rigorously planned or entirely managed by the interviewer. Therefore, the translator and transcriber roles in this case may be to simply accurately convey the content of the interviews and the interactions therein rather than assuring invisibility.

Nonetheless, any translator faces the issue of losing some idioms, expressions, and ideas in translation. Some expressions, for example, are embedded in deep cultural context and cannot be translated literally. Moreover, figurative language can also be challenging because it is related to sounds and images that are also cultural. As we are socialized throughout our lives to associate certain images to specific situations, language plays an enormous role in perception and nonverbal communication. These issues are even more complicated when translating dialects and colloquial talk, as in our case. Translating Syrian dialects (with all of their specific images, cultural expressions, and so on) presented its own suite

of challenges beyond those we had already anticipated in translating from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) to English.

We noticed that between Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, mothers' facility with English had evolved, and mothers increasingly code-switched between Arabic and English. This presented us with intriguing sociolinguistic material to ponder. For example, in Wave 2, as mothers' concerns turned to the hard realities of resettlement, they also sometimes expressed criticisms of the compulsory English programs they attended. In the excerpt below, presented in original Arabic and translated into English, a participant was critical of how English was taught in her government-funded LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) course and, revealingly, by whom. Her critique, though voiced in Arabic, was peppered with terminology she reproduced in English:

السنة الجاية لازم رابع. بس أنا ما بحس حالي لازم تحطمني رابع. لسة أنا بدوي... يعني بتحسيتها هي بدا تطلع... بدا تاخذ اجازة... بتحسني تدرسها مش قدير. يعني حاطين الامسات اللي بالESL هيك مثل فرض عتب... مله. مش عم بيعطوا بقلب و رب. عن جد. مش بقلب و رب. يعني بتيجي بتعيد الكلام... بتلك مثلا كلمة صعبة: "use dictionary" Okay ليش أنا بفهم dictionary حتى ا- use dictionary؟ أنا لغتي منيحة... use dictionary؟ أنا 6, 7 level... عم افهم الموضوع حتى استحمل dictionary؟ بتضلها بتبهدل مثلا... (...)

يعني هلا في ناس صارلها 7 سنين. 8 سنين ب- level 2 او 3... يا اختي نحنا كلنا صارلنا سنة سنة! مثل المثل... جاين ناكل English! عشان بدنا نعمل. مس بدنا نعد. أنا بستغرب في واحدة صارلها عشر سنين... لك level 1! معقول انت عشر سنين؟ لازم كنت أنا أبلغ كندا! والaccent... أكبر غلط... بيحطلونا انسات مش كنديين. طب ليش؟ (...). شو عم بتحطيلي صينية؟ هديك المرة عم نتقلنا املاء... نحنا دارسين بيلادنا "that" ... "that" ... شو هي "dat"؟ عم بتقلنا الاملاء... "dat". شلون يدك تكديب "dat"؟ اتهجيبها يا الله... "dat". يا الله شو هي "dat"؟ كتبت "d-o-d" ... "dat" ... على اللفظ اللي عم بتقول. "dat". هي "that". طب ليش؟ ما هي عم تأسسنا. اذا accent تبعوت زبالة... شو بدا تعلمنا؟ قتلهم نحنا عم نتعلم English هندي. الaccent الهندي. لما بيحكوا الكنديين بنفهم عليهم. الaccent اللي عم تحكيها... هذا أكبر غلط (...).  
معا كان... بنت البلد غير.

P: Next year, I have to go to level four. But I don't feel like I can go to level four. I still want to [learn]. . . . You [impersonal] feel like she wants to leave . . . like she wants to take a break. . . . You feel like she's not professional; like those who teach ESL classes do it out of boredom, to keep themselves busy. They don't do their job wholeheartedly. Really. Not wholeheartedly. She comes and repeats everything and if there's a word that's hard to understand, she says "use dictionary." Okay, but do I even understand what's in the dictionary so I can use dictionary?! Is my language level that high that I can use the dictionary? Am I in level six, seven . . . do I understand what's going on so that I can use the dictionary? She keeps offending us. . . . Now, some people have been in level two or three for seven to eight years. But we've been here for a year! A year! And like they say, we want to "eat" the English language [as in,

learn it as fast as we can] because we want to work, not just stay inactive. I am surprised, there is a woman who has been in level one for ten years now. Is that possible? Ten years in *level one*? And the *accident* [accent]. . . . The biggest mistake they make is assigning instructors that are not Canadian. Why? . . . How do you assign a Chinese instructor? Last time, she was dictating us words. We learned in our country, “that” . . . “that.” She was dictating us. . . . She says “dat.” What’s “dat!” How do you write “dat!” Spell it! I wrote “d-e-t” as she was saying it. “Dat” is “that.” Why? She’s supposed to be teaching us the fundamentals, and her accent is awful! How are we going to learn? I tell them, we’re learning Indian English. The Indian accent. When the Canadians speak, we understand them. . . . The accent she [the instructor] speaks . . . that’s the biggest mistake. Whatever it is, *bent al balad* [literally “the country’s daughter”—meaning someone born here] would be different.

The example above showcases some of the nuances of translating a passage from Arabic to English when participants toggle between languages. All interviews were conducted in colloquial Arabic—more precisely a mix of Syrian, Lebanese, Kurdish, and Iraqi Arabic—which means that the interviews contain images and figurative language that do not exist in MSA. For instance, the local expression *nakol* (to eat something) is typically used for books, referring to the idea of consuming all the knowledge that exists and thus becoming more knowledgeable in a field. This is why, in the above excerpt, the participant says, “*nakol el English*”—meaning she is *eager* to learn English and improve her proficiency as much as she can so that she can start working right away.

The excerpt also introduces some of the complicated dynamics of eliciting and then transcribing narratives where a participant may express racism against nonwhite Canadians in her criticism of resettlement services. With regard to the participant’s choice of words, *Ebn* (son) or *Bent* (daughter) *al balad* (literally “son/daughter of the country”) is another local expression typically used to refer to someone who was born in and is ostensibly familiar with a country. In this specific context, *bent al balad* does not refer to the Indigenous peoples of Canada, but someone who is a “native” speaker of English, who exhibits “correct” pronunciation. The mother in the excerpt above explains that native English speakers (expressed principally as Canadian-born and, perhaps, white-presenting

Canadians) would be preferable, as she believes they could teach English with a “Canadian” accent more efficiently and accurately. This is why she says “a native Canadian would be *different*,” in comparison to a “Chinese” or “(East) Indian” instructor whom she describes as possessing an alternative accent. Expressing herself in Arabic and English plays a major role for the mother in retaining authority, ensuring that the transmission of certain ideas is even more accurate when communicating with a fellow Arabic speaker.

Finally, the italicized words were the ones expressed by the participant in English in the original interview. We were fascinated to note which words or expressions were in English (as opposed to Arabic) and how language became ever more flexible in these interactions. For example, when the participant above repeats what her instructor says in class, she repeats it in the same language that it was originally expressed in (*use dictionary*). In this case, the participant criticizes her instructor by mimicking exactly her use of English. We use italics to call attention to mothers’ code-switching and their choice to directly quote the English speakers with whom they interact, giving readers a sense of the layering of language in the original interaction.

#### WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS FOR VALIDATING PARTICIPANTS

As described above, interviewers must have cultural and linguistic knowledge to produce an accurate translation. In our case, certain words were used by mothers in a different way from their literal meanings. For example, the word *mufawada* was often used by participants who were sponsored as Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs). This word literally means “negotiation”; it is typically used by newcomers to refer to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the agency that helped them arrive to Canada. The term *ajaneb* is another example: literally “foreigners,” it is usually used to refer to non-Arabs who live in Arabic-speaking countries but do not speak the Arabic language. The use of this word during the interviews was particularly interesting to us, since in this case the interviewee (a newcomer mother) is the one typically considered a “foreigner” when compared to the primary reference group of long-standing permanent residents and citizens of Canada. Therefore, not knowing what this word means in this context might affect an interviewer’s understanding of the issues raised by the interviewee. In other words,



interviewers and transcribers need to be aware of these specificities; otherwise it becomes hard to provide a full translation of the meanings attached.

In other cases, interviewers must rely on their own interpretations, especially when the same word is used in different ways. The tone becomes important to take into account; it is the interviewer's job to be able to pick up on what the tone conveys. Most principally, religious expression is common in the broader SWANA region and linked to the individual and social act of thanking and praising God to acknowledge God's presence and power. Religious expressions like *inshallah* (ان شاء الله ["if God wills"]) and *Alhamdulillah* (الحمد لله ["thank God"]) constantly appeared in our interviews. As Zubay writes, "When we say thanks in English . . . our gratitude is directed at our peer, another mortal. But in Arabic, the phrase *Alhamdulillah* [is] for gratitude that can only be directed toward the Creator. . . . All praise and glory be to God" (Zubay 2010–11: 13). Nonetheless, there are critical nuances to how mothers deployed *Alhamdulillah* in our research:

(1) to literally thank God for a specific blessing, (2) as a sarcastic way of talking about an unpleasant situation, and (3) as a way to avoid answering an interviewer's question.

For instance, when one participant was asked about her current relationship with her husband, she seemed hesitant or unsure how to respond. In this case, her solution was to avoid answering the question:

**Rula:** So, this happened until you got adjusted, right?

**P13:** *Alhamdulillah*.

**Rula:** And you and him [your husband] now, are you OK? Are you facing any difficulties?

**P13:** [a bit hesitant] *Alhamdulillah*.

In the interaction above, the participant's use of *Alhamdulillah* without any additional elaboration was a strategy she used to avoid answering the interviewer's question. In its most basic translation ("thank God"), the term makes some contextual sense as an affirmative, or positive response to two linked queries about adjustments and difficulties. But for an interviewer or translator who is familiar with the intricacies of Arabic and the cultural dynamics underlying everyday terms like *Alhamdulillah*, an alternative, and in this case, more ambiguous meaning becomes more clear. In combination with the participant's terse, hesitant demeanor, here

*Alhamdulillah* suggests the participant is seeking a socially-sanctioned way to avoid the question. At other times, *Alhamdulillah* was used in a sarcastic way to describe an unpleasant or unfortunate situation:

**Rula:** And the prices went up?

**P6:** Too much. I'm telling you, no one would rent this room [in the basement] for 5,000 JOD [Jordanian dinar]. I rented it for 25,000 [JOD] . . . I told my husband, "*Alhamdulillah*, I am being buried alive." [laughs]

Here, the participant describes her experience living in Jordan before traveling to Canada, explaining that her only housing option was to rent a room, rather than an apartment or a house, and for an unusually high price. She is specific in the way she describes her situation, comparing living in a room in the *basement* to being "buried alive." Taking her description literally, a researcher unfamiliar with the participant's cultural context might be perplexed by the juxtaposition of *Alhamdulillah* and the idea of being "buried alive." However, an interviewer and translator aware of the contextual uses of this expression understands that in this case, it is used in an ironic, skeptical manner to reflect on one's unfortunate situation while still praising God. As in the first example, the tone and attitude of the participant suggests nuance in her use of *Alhamdulillah*, and confirms its multiple meanings to the researcher or reader.

In other instances, *Alhamdulillah* is used in its literal and broader meaning, as a statement of gratitude to God for everything one possesses, and of acceptance for the situation one is in, no matter how distressing and difficult it is. It is a way of acknowledging that God has a plan for everything and that one trusts God's plans. The example below confirms this idea:

**P15:** Yes, I had a house with four bedrooms . . . but during the war, everything . . . from the pressure, everything breaks. They fix things and they break again, and they fix again.

**Rula:** OK. . . . It was hard.

**P15:** *Alhamdulillah*. . . .

**P15:** Yes, they [my sons] want to leave [Syria] but it's not possible.

**Rula:** I see. . . . How do you feel when you think about the fact that they cannot leave?

**P15:** Sometimes I don't like hearing their voice, because we would start crying. . . . What can I do? It's too much for me [crying]. *Alhamdulillah*.

In this interaction, the participant says *Alhamdulillah* twice, after describing two unhappy situations. First, she explains difficulties in the war and how everything in her house would “break.” Later on, she talks about how hard it is to keep in touch with family who live in Syria or other parts of the world, suggesting that a simple phone call reminds her of the difficult situation they are in. Nonetheless, she expresses gratitude to God and communicates her trust in God’s plans, hence the use of *Alhamdulillah* after describing each struggle she has faced. In this case, praising God and showing gratitude in the face of hardship may be a type of coping mechanism to minimize stress and a felt sense of hopelessness.

Giving nuance to multiple forms of expression is key to a feminist practice of translation. As such, the central role of shared Arabic language and local knowledge in our research process cannot be overstated. Throughout the process, the interpretive expertise of RAs was crucial both in situ with participants and in the collective Arabic to English translations RAs crafted together. Their collaboration and unique knowledge facilitated a fuller understanding of the multiple meanings of mothers’ words and the communication of emotion by participants more generally.

### *Participatory-Action Activities and Newcomer Mothers’*

#### *Emergent Power*

The third way a feminist approach shaped the research was through the activities of the forty-one mothers who joined our project. Their participation took several forms across the pilot year, all of which involved mothers’ ongoing consent: (1) as research interlocutors, they made ongoing decisions to either continue or drop out through the course of the study; (2) two participants joined us in scholarly partnership as our copanelists at a major Canadian academic conference; and (3) once the pilot study came to a close, several other participants were commissioned to help us convene two community-building celebrations for local Syrian newcomer families, our university, and partner agencies.

The key action item in our collaboration with the newcomer mothers was to ensure that their participation in the study was completely voluntary, bearing in mind that they would perhaps feel compelled to participate due to felt pressure from their relationships with our partner agencies or even fellow mothers. In general, our interview data showed a shift in mothers’ sense of control about their destinies in Toronto across the first several months of their resettlement. In Wave 1, most mothers described a

felt sense of relief that they had safely relocated their families away from the conflict. But their initial sense of relief was also paired with new worries that came from their displacement to Canada, which was not the preferred choice of destination for many. By the time of Wave 2, however, we noticed evidence of a new sense of control emerging among the interlocutors. Only two mothers decided to leave the study. We believe that, for those participants who stayed, the research interviews were affirming experiences that confirmed they were valued and that they mattered.

In some cases, our collaboration with mothers also extended past the end of formal interviews. For example, we were granted funds through our university to organize celebrations at the close of the academic year, offering our research participants a respite from some of their everyday responsibilities by providing an afternoon off with home-style Syrian food, music, dancing, and childcare/activities for their families. We were delighted, as well, to bring our children with us, in contravention of the traditional participant-researcher boundaries and roles. For those mothers recruited through enrollment in English courses, we held the event in a beautiful, newly renovated common space between a library branch and a branch of our main partner agency, a resettlement organization. The site was easily accessible by public transit, with free parking, and is a year-round, cost-free social and recreational facility we wanted families and children to experience so that they might access those resources again. For the mothers recruited via referral sampling, the celebration was held on campus in a warm meeting space at Victoria College at the University of Toronto with live music provided by a popular musical group composed of local Syrian newcomers. We provided funds to families to cover travel costs to and from the event. To cater both events, we contracted with four participants who had indicated to us a desire to start catering businesses from their homes; we also contracted with a fifth participant to bake sweet and savory Syrian snacks for a participatory-action-inspired conference panel we later convened. It was a small act of reciprocity to put funds into mothers' wallets as they built catering experience, and to show gratitude for their participation in the study as well as their labor and skill.

Apart from the dynamics of mothers' participation, and the modest supports we attempted to reciprocate, we had to think more critically about if and how we might harness the research we had produced together to destabilize taken-for-granted power dynamics and inequalities in our profession. One way we tried this out for the first time was to field a

conference panel about our project with two research participants at our national sociology meeting. The mothers' participation, insights, and contributions—on the panel and particularly during a dynamic Q&A with professional sociologists and graduate students—drew on feminist praxis to reimagine how scholarly conference panels are typically organized.

From the interviews themselves Rula and Rasha indicated that two interlocutors seemed especially keen to be more involved in the research and knowledge production process. One mother, Alia, had a degree in social work and was a practicing social worker before the war.<sup>13</sup> She had directly asked Rasha if there was a way for her to bring her scholarly training and skills into the project. The other interlocutor, Najwa, described to Rula a strong interest in social science issues and a longing to attend university once her children were safe and settled. We approached Najwa and Alia about joining us as conference panelists, and invited them to offer any insights or comments—about their backgrounds, involvement in the research endeavor, and experience of migration and resettlement in Toronto—they wanted to share with the audience. They expressed special interest in fielding questions in an open Q&A format with the audience. Because very few of the conference attendees spoke Arabic, Rula served as a real-time translator for Najwa; Alia was comfortable to communicate in English with Rasha looped in at Alia's signal for translation assistance when necessary.

Following a conventional fifteen-minute presentation on preliminary findings by faculty and a presentation of similar length on project methodology by the RAs, Najwa and Alia briefly introduced themselves. We then segued to Q&A, where a flurry of hands were raised. When asked by an audience member what message she wanted to convey to Canadians, Alia didn't hesitate: "We are the only people who can explain ourselves. Involve newcomers in everything." Her directive resonated with the original goal of our project as we had pitched it to the IRCC-SSHRC funding agency one year earlier: that the Rapid Impact program and all related policy decisions could only be assessed if the observations and insights of Syrian newcomers were centered in the analysis.

Another question posed to both mothers was asked by a well-known feminist sociologist: "Why did you decide to participate in this study?" Najwa (as translated in real time by Rula) described coming to Canada with skepticism about the relationship between what she termed "Islamic cultures" and "the West." Based on her observations from media and what she heard from fellow Syrians before resettling in Canada, Najwa felt strongly

that Canadians were hostile to “Islamic culture.” She described that for her, participating in the research project was a way to test these ideas and to see if the “two cultures” could get along or if they would be at odds. She described being pleased to discover their compatibility, after a year of close-up experience and observation of how we, the members of the research team, conducted ourselves with her and her fellow participants. She described having felt from her first interview that being part of the project meant she mattered and was empowered in her new world. While we and the audience were both captivated by Najwa’s savvy observations, all of us on the research team were especially humbled by the truth she revealed about our collective research endeavor: as we had been researching her, she had been researching us in turn.

### **Conclusion**

In order to center the margins in a feminist approach to research, the unequal relations *between* women at the intersection of citizenship status, class, nation, race, and other categories of asymmetrical power must be addressed. Drawing from black feminist and third world/transnational feminist epistemologies, we felt that an important lens into Canada’s post-2015 Rapid Impact regime was possible by centering the insights of recently arrived Syrian mothers. The interventions of feminist sociologists offered us a sharp analytic and theoretical justification to design our project as such, in spite of a mainstream academic and policy environment in migration studies that remains disinclined to incorporate the situated knowledge of women.

Once we began the project, a feminist approach further influenced the research in three ways. It enabled us to assemble and sustain a team of researchers that, in its internal organization, upended traditional power dynamics between faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, and respondents. It offered us a tool kit to translate the fullness of what our Arabic-speaking respondents shared. And in opening our research to involve a range of participatory-action activities driven by respondents, the project thrived. With greater and lesser success, we attempted to put feminist epistemology to practice in ways we hadn’t in our previous research endeavors. The message offered here is not unique or innovative; simply put, we are encouraged that the small adjustments we made based in feminist praxis yielded a project more expansive and inclusive than first imagined. Whether by copresenting with participants at an academic conference, bringing our families and children together over food and music, or

in the primary act of bearing witness to mothers' narratives of war and resettlement, our own identities as mothers, daughters, and sociologists based in Canada continue to evolve as we learn to listen in Arabic.

### Notes

- 1 We are grateful to the editors and reviewers at *Meridians* for their deep engagement and feedback on an earlier draft of this essay. The research described here was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.
- 2 Information about the expansion of our pilot study into a 2018–23 project with mothers and teenagers titled RISE (Refugee Integration, Stress, and Equity) is available at [www.riseteam.ca](http://www.riseteam.ca).
- 3 For a comprehensive, critical overview of the sociology of refugee migration, including problematization of terms like *refugee* and *crisis* and erasures of South-South migration, see FitzGerald and Arar 2018.
- 4 This observation is based on our personal and professional communications with colleagues across Canada funded by SSHRC-IRCC. For the full list of funded projects see [http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/recipients-recipientaires/2016/syrian\\_refugee-refugie\\_syrien-eng.aspx](http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/recipients-recipientaires/2016/syrian_refugee-refugie_syrien-eng.aspx).
- 5 We thank an anonymous reviewer for asking us to engage this important issue.

- 6 We use SWANA to refer to the region commonly known as the Middle East. See Culcasi 2011 for a feminist geopolitical analysis of the “Western-imperialist” Middle East category.
- 7 See Chughtai and Myers 2017 for their anthropological and hermeneutical theorization of “entering the field” as “a fusion of horizons where a fieldworker is ‘thrown’” (795).
- 8 For “public mothering” as an entry point to trust and rapport in the field, see Candelario 2009: 29–31.
- 9 All interviews began with a review of the verbal consent form, including a participant’s consent to be asked difficult or upsetting questions. In the case of Participant 3, although Rula had followed the protocol, once she began crying, Rula’s immediate reaction was to doubt whether she had in fact explained that “some of the questions might elicit some pain” (review of audio recording, November 10, 2016).
- 10 For more on the privileging of male-led, heterosexual nuclear families and the burdens placed on refugees in Canadian immigration policy, see Staver 2010.
- 11 We share this anecdote to convey the complexity of conducting research with women when men seek to place themselves at the center of analysis. Contra anti-Muslim racist and Islamophobic thinking, this phenomenon does not originate with, nor is it limited to Muslim or SWANA societies. Interactions like these are part and parcel of the “patriarchal bargain” found in Canada, the Global North and West (see Joseph 2000; Kandiyoti 1988; Moghadam 2004).
- 12 Pseudonyms used in line with University of Toronto Research Ethics Board protocol.

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