LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: SERVICE PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON
EMPOWERING YOUNG REFUGEE WOMEN

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Statement of the Problem

Refugee women face considerable challenges while fleeing their countries, and attempting to adjust to their new lives in their host country. As a result of being both a woman, and a member of a marginalized group, refugee women tend to suffer disproportionately during displacement and resettlement (UNHCR, 2015). They are more likely to be discriminated due their gender and ethnicity, and to lack the necessary community supports and resources needed to overcome barriers they encounter.

In response to the refugee crisis, service organizations have emphasized empowerment as a key way to improve the lives of refugee women. While there is extensive literature on refugee women and empowerment, traditional empowerment models often fail to question the position of helpers and to include the voices of the marginalized communities they are intended to serve.

This paper aims to explore the experiences of social service providers seeking to serve young refugee women in Chicago. By focusing on the reflections of service providers who identify as first and second generation immigrant and refugee women, it seeks to provide alternative narratives about empowering refugee women. This study will aim to answer the following questions:

- What are the experiences of service providers seeking to serve young refugee women?
- How do service providers define empowerment, and how does their definition shape their work?
- What recommendations do service providers offer for community organizations seeking to empower young refugee women?
Key Definitions

The following are some key terms related to refugee women, resettlement, and social services.

A *refugee* is defined as an individual who has been forcibly displaced from their country due to fear of persecution on the basis of their racial, religious, political, and social affiliations (UNHCR, 2015).

*Immigrants* are individuals who choose to leave their countries and relocate to a new country. This is typically to improve their lives by finding employment, gaining education, relocating with family, or to enhance their sense of security.

*Displacement* is a situation in which people are forced to leave their place of residence as a result of conflict, wars, and persecution.

*Resettlement* is the process of relocating refugees from an asylum country to a new country that has agreed to provide them with permanent settlement.

A *Resettlement Agency* provides services to refugees through their affiliate offices throughout the U.S. They help refugees settle into their new host communities by offering a wide range of services, such as language skills and employment.

*Social services* are a range of public services provided by government, private, and non-profit organizations. These services aim to create more effective organizations, build stronger communities, and promote equality and opportunity. Social services can be provided in the form of education, food subsidies, health care, job training, and housing assistance.
Service providers are individuals who work within government, private, and nonprofit organizations, and aim to provide various social services and programs to improve the well-being of individuals and communities they serve. They typically offer services such as education, health care, job training, and case management.

Background on Social Services for Refugee Women

The number of displaced individuals has increased dramatically over the past few years, and is currently at one of the highest rates in history (UNHCR, 2016). By the end of 2017, 68.5 million individuals were forced to flee from their countries worldwide (UNHCR, 2018). Refugees are individuals who have been forcibly displaced from their country due to fear of persecution on the basis of their racial, religious, political, and social affiliations (UNHCR, 2015).

Challenges Associated with Displacement

 Refugees face a myriad of challenges as a result of fleeing war, living in refugee camps, losing family members, and experiencing disruptions to education and employment (Miller, Mitchell, Brown, 2005). Being displaced from one’s home means deprivation of food, shelter, and housing, as well as disruptions in support systems, education, and employment (Tyrer, Fazel, 2014; Dura-Vila, et al., 2012). Many refugees end up settling in refugee camps for many years, where basic survival becomes the central focus, and there is a lack of safety, stability, and reliable social supports (Tyrer, Fazel, 2014; UNHCR, 2012). Refugees who resettle continue to face various obstacles as they attempt to adjust to their new lives in their host country (UNHCR, 2015). They may be subjected to other stressful events, such as economic hardship, social

**Gender Inequality**

The challenges associated with displacement and resettlement are further exacerbated by gender inequality (Ruben, Portes, 2001; Lewis, Lockheed, 2007; Mosselson, 2006). Research suggests that refugee women often suffer disproportionately during displacement and resettlement. In most countries throughout the world, women and girls suffer from inequality, and generally have less opportunities, fewer resources, and a lower social status than men and boys (UNHCR, 2008). Refugee women and girls are less likely than men and boys to have access to even the most fundamental of their rights, such as food, housing, and shelter (UNHCR, 2008). They also face a higher risk for human rights violations, such as sexual and gender based violence, discrimination, and marginalization (Women, peace, and security, 2000). During resettlement, refugee women may also be expected to take on new roles, such as being the breadwinner of their families and communities (Jabbar, 2015). These experiences can cause refugee women to feel alone, vulnerable, and socially isolated.

**Social Exclusion**

The challenges refugee women face can be further complicated by race (Ruben, Portes, 2001; Lewis, Lockheed, 2007; Mosselson, 2006). While the path to assimilation is often thought of as uniform, Portes and Rumbaut (1990) suggest that it is a process that is subject to many contingencies that are complicated by various factors. Though some refugees may easily assimilate into the dominant culture, others who are perceived to be more “culturally different”
from the mainstream group, may be denied the same opportunities for assimilation (Ogbu, Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Refugees who belong to marginalized minority groups may face further exclusion during displacement and resettlement. Membership within a particular ethnic community ultimately impacts resettlement outcomes and membership within a visible minority group can be associated with a marginalized social status (Francis, 2016; N.K., 1991). Such research suggests that marginalized refugee women may also be more likely to experience social exclusion, and denied equal access to opportunities needed to succeed.

Literature Review

Young refugee women have been the focus of several studies related to trauma, community support, and empowerment. Scholars have focused on community support and empowerment as a key way to improve the lives of young refugee women.

Trauma/Mental health

Researchers have found significant levels of depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicide amongst refugees (Ackerman, 1997; Aroian, Spitzer, & Bell, 1996; Carballo, Grocutt & Hadzihasanovic, 1996; Hauff & Vaglum, 1995). The risks for mental illnesses, such as depression, are higher for refugee women who often suffer from isolation due to language and cultural barriers (Beiser, 1999; Garcia-Peltoniemi, 1991; Hull, 1979). Conversely, positive mental health outcomes are found amongst individuals and groups who have spent more time in their host countries, developed stronger language skills, and who have gained access to the resources and opportunities they need for a successful integration (Westermeyer, Neider, & Vang, 1984).
Community Support

Literature consistently suggests that social support is essential for individuals and communities who have endured stressful or traumatic life circumstances, and those who suffer from mental and physical illness. Having a supportive community can have protective and healing effects for those affected (Caplan, 1974, 1976; Cassel, 1974; Cobb, 1976; House, 1981). Belonging to a community increases the likelihood that individuals will form deeper and more meaningful relationships, encounter social support, and improve their mental health (Lin, Ye, & Ensel, 1999). Being a member of a community organization can also help refugees establish social bonds, and build cultural connections with their host communities (Fiske 2006; Kawachi and Berkman 2001).

Aguilar and Barnes (2007) explored the benefits and shortcomings of community supports amongst Cuban refugees living in Texas. The study suggested that support from the host community was essential in order for refugees to manage the stress associated with resettlement and to become part of their new community (Barnes and Aguilar 2007). The study also supported the idea that having access to community supports can enhance one’s health and wellbeing. The participants gained the most practical support from resettlement agencies and other Cubans.

Maintaining close ties with an ethnic community has been associated with positive outcomes for refugees. Rogg (1974) found that having strong ethnic communities provided Cuban refugees with refuge, security, an ethnic identity, and a feeling of belonging. Being able to identify with “ethnic confidants,” having membership within ethnic social organizations, and establishing emotional ties with friends are positively related to psychological wellbeing for
refugees (Tran, 1987) and negatively associated with depression (Vega, Kolody, & Valle, 1987). Beiser, Turner, and Ganesan (1989) found that having access to a substantial group of persons from the same ethnic group protected the mental health of Southeast Asian refugees, while marginality within the group predicted hostility among Hmong refugees (Westermeyer & Uecker, 1997).

Being a member of a supportive community can also contribute to resilience on an individual and communal level (Green and Livingstone, 2002). Community resilience is a process that involves strengthening individuals, families, and communities. This process enables members of social, organizational, and economic systems to cope effectively with stress and threats during times of crisis (Doron, 2005). When community resilience is strengthened, individuals and communities can encounter healing from grief, find solutions to resolve conflicts, and move forward with hope (Doron, 2005).

Doron (2005) explored the value of building community resilience amongst refugees within South Lebanese (SLA) Army communities in Israel. Because refugees face varying forms of grief as a result of displacement, community resilience is needed to help address the past, and move forward towards the future. She presents several possible approaches for strengthening community resilience amongst refugees. Examining the benefits that these approaches can provide, she finds these components essential to the beginning of strengthening community resilience amongst refugee communities.
**Community-Based Service Organizations**

The literature reveals that social service organizations can provide crucial services that address the complex and interconnected needs that refugees face. Social service organizations can provide services that address the trauma that many refugees suffer from as a result of displacement, and cultivate safe spaces where they can establish trust and rebuild networks of support. They can also provide programs that enhance their skills and connect them with the resources needed to re-establish themselves and their communities.

While social service organizations can be empowering, the literature suggests that there are often “more gaps than bridges” between service providers and those they seek to serve (Francis, Chan, 2016). Many mainstream organizations have a tendency to use a “one-size-fits-all” delivery model that does not take into account the different needs of diverse refugee groups (Shields et al. 2006). Social service providers may also have preconceived ideas or pre-established models that are ineffective or even detrimental to the communities they serve (Francis, Chan, 2016). Unless the gaps are addressed, empowerment efforts can be greatly hindered.

**Empowerment**

The idea of empowerment has been understood and applied in various ways by scholars. Much of the literature on refugees has focused on the “learned helplessness” and “victimhood” of refugee communities (Aberman 2014). Traditional empowerment scholars have often positioned refugees as “passive recipients” of pre-defined services, rather than “agents” actively involved in making sense of their own needs and shaping their life outcomes (Fraser, 1989, p.
Refugee resettlement organizations have acted as “gatekeepers” of specific information and resources, and focused on refugees as the recipients of knowledge, support, and guidance, and (Malkki, 1996, p. 377). Leaders of resettlement organizations often assume an “expert” role in resettlement by utilizing develop top-down models for successful refugee integration (Harrell-Bond, 2002; Hyndman, 2000). Such leadership tends to be “asymmetrical and power laden by nature” (Harrell-Bond, 2002; Hyndman, 2000).

Dominant empowerment narratives about refugee women have been shaped by western thought. Such narratives have been greatly influenced by hegemonic discourses and practices (Anthias, 2002, p. 511). Erden (2016) postures that refugee subjectivity has been constructed with Western notions of “refugeenness,” that place factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and ability at the center of refugee crisis (Aberman 2014; Loftsdottir 2011, Erden, 2016). She finds that these narratives have been “hijacked by the rhetoric of gender equality, female vulnerability, and protection from danger” (Erden, 2016). In such narratives, women of the third world’s voices are excluded, and their participation within the empowerment process has been limited.

Empowerment has been understood as a complex and nuanced process. Leaders of empowerment projects often find themselves attempting to manage competing demands, obligations, and goals. They struggle to find balance between being idealistic versus practical, having stability versus flexibility, and utilizing rational versus alternative thinking (Bartle et al., 2002; Gibson & Schullery, 2002). In spite of the challenges faced, leaders of empowerment movements often justify their efforts as moral and good, and exempt from further explanation. The uncertainty that characterizes such work creates unspoken tensions that complicate the
degree to which programs can claim to empower individuals (Eliasoph, 2011, p. x). These
tensions illustrate the challenge of service work in diverse social environments.

Steimel (2017) explores how communication further complicates how empowerment
functions in refugee resettlement organizations. The study seeks to identify how empowerment is
understood and communicated by refugee resettlement staff and how those discourses of
empowerment are functioning in both productive and nonproductive ways for the refugees they
serve. It highlights the importance of unpacking what empowerment communication means to
those staff who employ it and for those clients in social change organizations who are
“empowered” by it, rather than simply assuming that organizational staff definitions of
empowerment are productive and meaningful to the clients they serve.

Steimel (2017) reveals the problematic side of empowerment programs when they are
“bestowed through edict” (Bandura, 1997). There can be a disconnect in communication between
staff members and refugees perception of the community’s needs. Providers in the study
pre-defined rules of empowerment which were tied to funding. Under such circumstances,
refugees were often forced to meet pre-set goals, instead of choosing their own, and denied the
ability to shape the terms of their empowerment (Papa, 1997). Refugees who found this process
disempowering, resisted a singular path to empowerment, and instead hoped for a more
multidimensional approach.

More recent approaches to empowerment view refugees as subjects, agents of change,
and authors of their own solutions. UNHCR has promoted community and participatory
approaches to refugee resettlement in which refugees are seen as “agents rather than subjects”
This approach involves investing in communities and forging partnerships with groups so that they can act as the authors of their own solutions (UNHCR, 2001). Refugee communities are repositioned as the primary “social actors with their own knowledges, voices and goals” in resettlement (Hynes, 2003; Korac, 2003; Rajaram, 2002).

Erden’s (2016) study challenges dominant narratives that depict refugees as victims and helpers as liberators. In the study, local women leaders partnered with Syrian refugee women to become agents of change and to create new social dynamics. This partnership sparked a “reciprocal consciousness-raising process” for both groups (Erden, 2016). The local women leaders and refugee women were both empowered to critically examine and redefine their social identities and to become self-sufficient through their social interactions. The study reveals some of the unspoken benefits accrued by the local women leaders, and presents some alternative endeavors for engaging in community-based service work.

Way (2013) explores the concept of empowerment within organizations focused on empowering young girls. She explores differing definitions of empowerment, and the tensions between theory and everyday practice. She praises efforts to empower especially marginalized communities, but warns providers to avoid reinforcing disempowering messages, and challenges organizations to approach the empowerment process an “ongoing and constantly negotiated state of engagement, rather than an endpoint or stable state of being” (Way, 2013).

**Improving Empowerment**

More recent approaches to empowerment call for a theoretical shift in the way empowerment is conceptualized. Empowerment needs to be reconceptualized as an ongoing and
multi-dimensional process that is negotiated within the constraints of a particular time and place, and functions in overlapping and competing ways (UNHCR, 2001; Steimel, 2017). All actors within the process must be engaged, and provided the space to make valuable contributions to the empowerment process (UNHCR, 2001; Steimel, 2017). Rather than emphasizing “empowerment” as a broad and singular concept in which an empowered person has “control,” theoretical understandings of empowerment must seek to recognize multiple empowerments in different life arenas and from different positionalities (Steimel, 2017). Empowerment should be understood as a process that is continuously negotiated amongst the individuals and communities involved.

Discriminatory practices within empowerment must be challenged and addressed. Critical feminist theory is an essential theoretical framework for addressing oppressive roots within women’s empowerment. Critical feminist researchers aim to “liberate all individuals, trouble foregrounded power relations that dominate humanitarian responses and reclaim the invisibilized agency of developing countries’ women” (Erden, 2016). Contrary to the “victimhood discourses” imposed on refugee women, critical feminist theory focuses on the capabilities and assets of women as a way to combat “patriarchal ideologies,” “emotional dependency,” and “learned helplessness,” (Dadds 2011; Loftsdóttir 2011).

Through engagement, women of developing countries can facilitate “holistic emancipatory discourses” that can enhance refugee women’s consciousness (Erden, O., 2016). Both refugee and local women can reposition themselves “within broader historical gender
discourses, reinterpret their past emancipatory experiences, create harmony by questioning outsider and insider relations, and criticize their own existence in the society” (Erden, O., 2016).

**Gaps in literature**

Much of the literature has focused on community support and empowerment as an essential way to improve the lives of young refugee women. However, these narratives often fail to adequately examine the position of helpers and to include the voices of the marginalized communities they are intended to serve. These gaps tend to contribute to the notion that the refugee experience is singular, rather than having being representative of a broad diversity of “experiences and meanings” and to underestimate refugees’ agency in making positive changes in their communities (Soguk, 1999; Erden, O., 2016).

**Methodology**

**Contexts**

This study focused on service organizations located in several racially and linguistically diverse communities throughout the northside of Chicago, Illinois. Chicago has welcomed over 30,000 refugees since 2002. The study involved service providers who have worked within a range of mainstream service organizations, multicultural refugee service agencies, and also ethno-specific community based organizations.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were five service providers who offered social services within northside communities in Chicago. All participants have worked or are currently working for one of the selected community organizations. The participants have and/or are currently
involved in work that involves direct contact with young refugee women. They represent a diverse range of ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds.

**Instruments**

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with service providers in order to better understand the types of services they offered, the scope of their work with young refugee women, and the challenges they have encountered while attempting to serve them. They were also asked to provide recommendations for how organizations might improve their services for this population. The researcher asked participants questions from an interview guide. Participants were asked questions regarding their experiences within the selected organizations, and also encouraged to reflect on the topics that may not have been presented, but were relevant to the study.

**Recruitment**

The participants in this study were recruited using personal contacts and referrals made by other participants. Individuals working with young refugee women were contacted and invited to participate in an interview. These individuals were asked to suggest other individuals who were willing to participate. The target group was service providers who have and/or are currently serving young refugee women between the ages of 18-35.

All participants were informed of the details of the project. The information collected for the study was kept confidential, and aspects such as the actual names of participants and organizations were changed. The researcher stressed that the data would be strictly used for research purposes, and that the identities of both individuals and organizations would be kept
confidential. The researcher sought approval from the Loyola University’s Institutional Review Board prior to conducting the study.

**Data Collection**

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during May of 2018. The format was casual and open-ended. Participants were encouraged to respond to questions, but to also reflect on aspects of their experiences that may not have been addressed in the questions. The research asked follow-up questions, and sought clarifications when needed.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The data collected was coded into different sections, then organized to according to common themes that arose. Each part was shaped by service providers responses and the themes that were prevalent across their narratives. The aim to was to capture the experiences of service providers who serve young refugee women. This approach allowed for a descriptive summary of service providers’ experiences, while focusing on the use of their voices to shape the final narrative.

**Background on the Service Providers in the Study**

**Nashida**

Nashida is a 40 year old activist, writer, and community worker. She has spent over 10 years serving the Oromo community in Chicago and abroad. She was born in a small town located in Oromia, Ethiopia. She and her family were resettled in Chicago through a refugee resettlement agency. During her college years, she was invited to work on a service project for the Oromo community. After the project was finished, she continued to serve within the
community, and was put in charge of coordinating services for the women and youth. As a women’s adviser and a youth coordinator, she provided volunteer-based counseling, job training, and afterschool services. She later worked as a translator at a larger resettlement agency on the northside. While continuing to serve and raise awareness for the Oromo community in Chicago, Nashida recently started an organization that focuses on serving high school girls in Oromia. In addition to raising funds to support the girls and their education, she hopes to develop an exchange program between Oromo high school students in Chicago and the high school girls in Oromia.

Marie

Marie is a 35 year old community organizer and entrepreneur. She has spent the past 10 years serving refugee women in Chicago. While she is originally from Rwanda, she lived as a refugee in seven other African countries before coming to the United States. A few years after resettling in Chicago, she began working as a translator for the health division of a resettlement agency located on the northside. In addition to translating during hospital and home visits, she also worked with other smaller community-based agencies, providing counseling and facilitating health-related workshops. Marie is now in the process of starting an organization to harness support and resources for refugee women in Chicago.

Esther

Esther is a 45 year old university professor and community worker. She has spent over 12 years serving refugee communities in Chicago. Esther was born in Burundi, a small country in central Africa. She came to Chicago as a Fulbright scholar to complete her masters’ at a
university in Illinois. She later received a scholarship to complete her PhD at a university in Chicago. While completing her degree, Esther began working with a resettlement agency, coordinating services for refugees from Sudan. Much of her work focused on grant writing to secure funding for the community and also teaching English. She later started an organization for young African refugee girls to support their education, and to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to reach their life goals.

**Charu**

Charu is 38 year old graduate student and community worker. She has been providing social services for immigrant and refugee communities for 15 years. She and her family came to Chicago as immigrants from India. She grew up in an immigrant community on the Northside, and recalls many of her childhood friends being either immigrants or refugees. While completing her masters’ degree at a university in Chicago, she began working with an agency located in racially diverse community on the northside. Charu provided visitation services for immigrant and refugee children and women affected by domestic violence. During her time within the organization, she also volunteered counseling services and led workshops to raise awareness about domestic violence.

**Alma**

Alma is a 25 year old community worker. She has spent five years working with refugee and immigrant communities. Alma was born in Illinois, yet she spent much of her childhood abroad. While an undergraduate at a university in Chicago, she interned at several agencies, teaching subjects such as English, and raising awareness on issues affecting immigrant and
refugee communities. After graduating, she began working full-time as an administrator within a resettlement agency for refugees.

**Key Themes**

There were several key themes that arose across the interviews with the service providers. Each participant reflected on their identities and experiences as immigrants or refugees, their motivation for serving the refugee community, and their experiences providing services for young refugee women. Each participant shared their definition of empowerment, and how their definition has defined their work within this population. They each also provided their perspective on how service provisions for young refugee women can be improved.

**Identity and Experiences as Refugee/Immigrant**

All of the service providers identified as a first or second generation refugee or immigrant. When asked about their backgrounds as first and second generation refugees and immigrants many of the service providers described their experiences as profoundly formative. All of them spent part of their childhood outside of the U.S. Besides Charu, who was born in India, the remaining women spent their early years in Africa. Each of the women experienced being a minority at some point in their life. Their identity as a minority was associated with aspects such as their gender, ethnicity, and status as a refugee/immigrant. Having a minority status was also associated with being vulnerable to discrimination and oppression.

As one of the only girls educated in her village in Burundi, Esther reflected on how gender inequality limited the educational opportunities available to her and her peers. As a female child growing up in Oromia, Ethiopia, Nashida shared her firsthand experience with
compounding forms of oppression. She recalls, “Oromo people were oppressed as a people, and then we were oppressed as women, and then oppressed because I grew up in a predominantly Muslim area.”

Charu and Alma talked about their identities as immigrant minorities. For Charu, having an immigrant background distinguished her from her non-immigrant peers. For Alma, being apart of immigrant family allowed her to stand in between her American and immigrant identity and to experience aspects of “American whiteness” in a “brown body.”

Each of them talked about their personal experiences with displacement and immigration. Nashida and Marie identified as refugees who were displaced due to war and conflict in their countries, and resettled by an agency. Nashida resettled with her family at a young age, while Marie was displaced to several African countries before resettling in the U.S. with her family as an adult. Charu and Alma both identified as second generation immigrants due to the fact that their parents were immigrants. While Alma was born in the U.S., both Alma and Charu came to the U.S. with their families at a young age. Esther identified as a first generation immigrant who came to the U.S. as a scholarship recipient to complete her PhD.

Out of all the service providers, besides Alma who is a U.S. citizen, Esther expressed having the most choice in deciding to come to the U.S. By placing emphasis on the fact that she and her family immigrated to the U.S. by choice, Charu clearly distinguished her case as different from her refugee friends who experienced forced displacement. However, her choice is described within the context of her family’s decision to immigrate. As survivors of war and conflict, Nashida and Marie expressed the least amount of choice regarding their decision to
come to the U.S. Their resettlement is described as a result of circumstances beyond their control rather than an actual choice.

All of the women talked about challenges they faced as a result of becoming a refugee or immigrant. For Nashida, Marie, and Esther, these challenges resulted from living in countries affected by war, and were shaped by circumstances beyond their control. Marie and Nashida were both physically displaced due to war and conflict. While Nashida described her resettlement experience of coming with her family and being resettled by a large established agency in a straightforward, and matter of fact way (typical resettlement trajectory), Marie spoke about being displaced to multiple counties and living in refugee camps where resources were scarce. She implied that her experiences with resettlement were complicated and difficult. For Esther, losing her father at a young age due to war, resulted in her facing financial instability and her feeling responsible for protecting and supporting her family. Charu and Alma did not imply that any of their personal challenges were directly related to their families decision to immigrate. The struggles they described were more specifically related to having an immigrant identity while living the U.S.

For some of the women, adjusting to life in the U.S. presented challenges as well. For Nashida and Marie, adopting a new culture, language, and lifestyle in America was quite difficult. Nashida described tasks, such as learning to use house appliances and navigating the purchase of feminine hygiene products, as frustrating. These tasks were further complicated by her limited English. For Nashida, learning a new language and culture was as daunting as fighting ocean currents. She reflects,
As an African woman, seeking services in the US is difficult. Because you just don't know. I mean, first of all, even if you spoke the language, it's a new culture. Everything is new. You are brought and you are picked from somewhere and dropped in the middle of the ocean. It doesn't matter how much you know how to swim, you get lost. You get disconnected and you feel out of place (Nashida).

While Nashida faced difficult challenges as a youth adjusting to life in the U.S., she implied that the severity of her challenges may have been lessened due to her young age. She stated,

As a refugee you don't, you don't even think of that. Its like survival mode. Honestly, it’s very much survival mode…. Luckily, I came in when I was very young. When you're young things don't bother you. Life is great. You got food today, you don't worry about tomorrow. Had I come to this country at my age I probably would die of depression (Nashida).

Marie described her experiences in a similar way. Coming from a refugee camp possibly made adjustment more difficult. She noted that comprehending the relevance of opportunities that she did not have access to in the camps was initially challenging.

In the camp as refugees we never had that stuff. So when we came here it’s hard to understand first why I have to do this when many years I have never done it. Because those opportunities just did not present themselves (Marie).

She also compared learning a new culture to traveling on a train along an unfamiliar route.

Esther talked about what it feels like to come to a new country and lose connection with your own culture. She said that losing roots was horrible, and a common experience for immigrants and refugees. Alma and Charu described no challenges adjusting to life in America.

Each of the women talked about what it meant to identify as a refugee, immigrant, and/or woman. For Charu having immigrant identity provided her with different experiences than her non-immigrant peers. Being different was not perceived as negative, but something positive that she took pride in. For Alma, having an immigrant identity was described as a privilege that
allowed her the freedom to establish alternative vantage points, and to navigate multiple identities. Alma explained,

> Being connected to the immigrant identity and having relatives who learn English and experience living in America as an immigrant and a brown body, I think that I’ve throughout my life gained a lot of skills from like standing in between like white American-ness and then also navigating a different culture and immigration because I was born in the US and had experienced living in other countries (Alma).

Alma describes her identity as not fixed, but malleable. Navigating multicultural spaces, and standing in between multiple identities is viewed as a way of life. She states,

> I've been navigating many different cultures and languages, when I say cultures I guess I can also mean like narratives, like different types of priorities and religions for my whole life….And also feel most comfortable in spaces that are multicultural because I can't go back to one identity and say that that is 100 percent me (Alma).

Esther talked about her immigrant identity in a similar, yet more distanced and nuanced way. She did not specifically refer to herself as an immigrant, yet identified with many of the experiences of refugees and immigrants. Esther described becoming an immigrant in terms of the benefits it provided her, such as accomplishing her dreams of bettering herself and supporting her family. She also identified with the feeling of being a foreigner in a new country, not understanding how “systems” work, and the reflected on the pain of losing cultural roots.

Marie specifically referred to herself as a refugee woman, and talked about the unique benefits and challenges of those identities. She associated being a refugee and a woman with descriptions of vulnerability and dependency. Nashida also referred to herself as a refugee woman. For Nashida, being a refugee was associated with struggles, but also a new identity that enables her to stand outside of the realms of her community’s cultural traditions. This identity
allows her a distanced vantage point from which she is able to reflect on these cultural practices and the specific aspects that she hopes to change.

**Motivation for Serving Young Refugee Women**

All of the service providers expressed similar motivations for wanting to serve young refugee women. The main motivating factors were their shared identities and experiences as refugees, immigrants, and/or as women, their concern for refugee, immigrant, and women’s issues, and their desire to meet a perceived need within the community.

Having identities and personal experiences as refugees, immigrants, and women enabled the service providers to empathize with young refugee women they served, and to establish a deep awareness and concern for the issues affecting them. For Nashida, growing up in a region surrounded by compounding forms of oppression exposed her to the various forms of subjugation that marginalized refugee women face. For Esther, facing gender inequality during her younger years caused her to be concerned about the educational experiences of young African refugee girls. For Marie, living as a refugee in various camps provided her with firsthand experiences with specific vulnerabilities that refugee women face. For all three women, sharing the same culture and challenges enable them to empathize with and be concerned about the experiences of the young refugee women they served. Reflecting on her work as a service provider for predominantly African refugee women, Marie describes,

> I was grateful because I can understand what we went through during the different camps since we came to this country as refugees…. And I loved it because any refugee who was coming, I saw them as me... I felt for them all (Marie).
Although Alma admits that her experiences with displacement were “very privileged,” she is still able to draw upon her multicultural background to connect with the challenges that refugees’ face. For Charu, growing up in an immigrant community and having access to opportunities that her undocumented friends were denied, causes her to be concerned about marginalized refugee and immigrant communities.

I myself am an immigrant and I grew up in an immigrant community in the north side of Chicago. And so some of my friends were refugees whereas I was an immigrant…. what I was allowed in terms of being able to work from a very young age was because I came here documented while some of my immigrant friends weren't documented and their trajectory, it was totally different than mine (Charu).

Service providers’ perspectives and experiences a refugees, immigrants, and women motivate them to use their skills and resources to meet perceived needs and to bring about positive changes in their communities. For Nashida, her childhood experiences with oppression motivated her to become an activist for her community. She states, “[Oppression] was happening while I was growing up and I hated that. I wanted to change that.” Esther’s experiences with gender inequality within her education system in Burundi motivated to extend access to educational and cultural opportunities that young refugee girls may lack. She states,

So that's why I decided to focus on young girls from Africa, helping them stay in school, go to college and be able to support their own families, but most importantly so that they don't lose their own cultures cause here you come, you see so many immigrants who come in and kind of lose their own cultures. So it's nice to be able to support them and show them that their countries are beautiful, they have languages that are great, that they should keep it all while learning English and adjusting themselves to the American culture.

Marie’s experiences as a refugee woman motivates her to support and empower refugee women in her community. She recalls,
I started my organization because I felt like as women, we have to work together to support each other, to empower each other and to love each other…. I felt like, I can't just sleep and not help. I think it would be good if I do it…. It makes me feel good when I see somebody happy (Marie).

For Charu, having refugee and immigrant friends and family motivates her to extend services to those communities that may have otherwise be excluded. She states, “Just having those roots in an immigrant and refugee community has really inspired me to dedicate my life to providing services” (Charu). Alma was motivated by the desire to improve refugee communities’ access to resources they may otherwise be denied. She recalls the moment she had an epiphany, “Like, wow, okay, because of my background, this is where I should leverage resources and leverage my privilege to support this community.”

**Defining their Roles as Social Service Providers**

All of the women described specific roles that they took on during their work with the young women. These roles appeared to be shaped by their personal experiences, as well as specific needs that the service providers encountered during their work with the young women. Identifying these needs seemed to help them determine and redefine their roles, as well as their approaches to serving the women. After working with African refugees for several years, Esther discovered that many of the youth were falling behind academically. These encounters, along with her personal academic experiences, inspired her to take on the role of an educator, and to use her knowledge and skills to educate young refugee girls. Alma’s encounters with racism and oppression caused her to be concerned about the lack of resources available to marginalized groups. This compels her to take on the role of a facilitator by “leveraging” her own privileges to ensure that young refugee girls got access to the resources needed to succeed. Marie often
referred to her identity as a woman and mother when making sense of her relationship to the women and their struggles. She described her role in terms of the common grounds she established with them, and the support and encouragement she offered. Nashida and Charu mainly discussed their roles in terms of the services they offered, and emphasized their roles as providers of social services.

All the women expressed a desire to use their experiences, skills, and/or resources to improve the lives of the young refugee women they served. Marie and Esther described feeling compelled to respond to the needs they encountered, and recalled experiencing feelings of discomfort with the idea of being aware of the issues without taking action to solve them.

In 2016, I went back, that's when I found some kids were not, did not continue school, dropped out, and had these jobs that won't get them anywhere. So it's almost like they are still where I left them...So that's when I realized that they were not where they should be, so that, so it was like a journey (Esther).

Alma described facing a similar conflict and viewed her role as essential to addressing the issues she encountered. She stated,

If I don't use my privileges to support what's happening, then I am another brown person who has achieved a certain economic status where I can disengage from racism or problems in the immigrant community (Alma).

Recognizing that her community was small and lacked funding motivated Nashida to take on various roles within the organization to help out as much she could. Charu is motivated by her own encounters with inequality and injustice.

Service providers reflected on how their perceptions of their role and approach to serving young refugee women had changed since the beginning of their work. Alma and Esther recalled initially having a “savior mentality,” and being driven by the desire to solely meet the perceived
needs of the groups they served. Both experienced a similar shift in perspective from the mindset of attempting to save versus serve them. For Esther, this shift in perspective was made possible through the practice of simply listening to the girls she served. She said,

    I actually thought I was going to just give them academics. Like “you're going to college. You're going to learn English and read.” But now, I just listen to the girls. What they bring… Things keep shifting depending on the where the girls are. So I really try to meet them where they are because that's what matters, you know (Esther).

Mutuality was a common theme in all the women’s stories. They all referred to commonalities that they shared with the young women, which appeared to be rooted in shared identities/experiences, and characterized by the women describing and treating their clients as equals. They also talked about the mutual exchanges they had with the young women they served, which involved them offering their services, as well as receiving something tangible in return. The women described the services they provided in terms of the knowledge, support, encouragement, and resources they provided. They described the returns in terms of the common grounds, new relationships, wisdom and understanding they gained during their work. Alma described the return she received in terms of what she learned from the young people she served. She said,

    I think the more that I have been in this community, the more I've worked with young people, the more I've learned about the power of young people…being in the community, I've learned a lot about their power and learned from their power (Alma).

All of the women described providing services as an open-ended learning experience. Having limited knowledge and learning along the way were consistent themes. They viewed this as a positive way to approach their work. Not assuming, and remaining open allowed space for
the young refugee women to voice their needs, and to also take part in coming up with solutions to the issues faced.

Service providers highlighted several types of barriers they encountered while serving refugee women. The main barriers discussed were culture, gender, language, and education. The service providers recalled the young refugee women feeling lost and disconnected from larger society. They also had difficulty overcoming cultural differences and figuring out new systems and how things work in the U.S. Service providers described overcoming cultural barriers as one of the most difficult challenges the young women faced and suggested that experiences likely led to feelings of confusion, anxiety, frustration, and defeat amongst the women they served.

Gender inequality was described as a source of significant barriers for the young refugee women they served. All of the service providers reflected on the types of subjugation and oppression the young women faced due to their gender. These issues were understood as being further complicated when coupled with factors such as culture, ethnicity, and religion. Nashida and Marie reflected the impact of male dominance of impact on the young African refugee women they served. These women were less likely to challenge unfavorable conditions and speak out about their mistreatment. Nashida found that these women lacked a sense of place, voice, and power. They believed the cause of this was male-centered cultural practices, and a lack of space for women to speak and lead in these communities. Nashida also suggested that certain cultural traditions and practices that emphasized the isolation of young African refugee women contributed to their isolation and lack of participation within their perspective communities.
Service providers also highlighted language as a barrier the young refugee women faced. Learning to speak English was a challenge that all of the young women they served encountered. This challenge was more difficult for those who spoke a language of a more marginalized group, and lacked a sufficient number of translators. Having little or no knowledge of the English language prior to their arrival also contributed to them experiencing more difficulty acquiring the language. Nashida recalled how language further complicated even more sensitive situations such as abuse.

Service providers encountered challenges during their work. Opposition was a common challenge they faced. Opposition and resistance came in many forms, from the organization, coworkers, and even women they served. Of all the service providers, Nashida expressed having the most opposition to her work. She experienced direct opposition from the women she sought to serve. She believed that the lack of respect and trust she encountered likely resulted from the young women’s cultural upbringing and beliefs that women leaders were inferior. She said,

I worked with women and sometimes I get more respect from men than women. Its very sad and true. Its like women are the number one opposition to you and even the same issues that you are fighting for them (Nashida).

The kinds of opposition that Alma faced were more subtle and nuanced. Although she faced no direct opposition to their views she presented, she expressed feeling unsupported by some of her co-workers and the leaders of her organization. This lack of support was most evident in their funding efforts, and partnerships. Charu’s experiences with opposition were more indirect as well. She recalled feeling alienated and ostracized when sharing what she described as “radical” views.
Other challenges described had to do with being overwhelmed by their workload, and being a minority within their organization. Marie’s deep concern for her clients’ well being resulted in her feeling like the work was continuous, and felt responsible for meeting needs that other providers overlooked. Alma described having similar feelings, and at times felt as though she had a “million things happening at once.” Being one of the few women of color was also a challenge for Alma, who felt burdened to be a voice and representative for the young women she served. For Nashida, being one of the only female service providers in a male dominated organization led to feelings of being stigmatized and labeled as outspoken and overbearing.

Service providers talked about the challenges that their organization faced. Many of those challenges had to do with the “restructuring” that took place as a result of the new administration’s immigration policies. This restructuring involved drastic changes in available funding, resettlement numbers, and the closing of some organizations. According to Alma, this event brought about very palpable changes within refugee communities. She recalled,

> When I first started in this community, a lot of people felt more positively about America and felt less afraid here. I don't even think that I would necessarily say it is more dangerous to be a refugee now in American than it was in 2013, but there's a lot more fear. Like I think that the hate was still present back then, but it wasn't so loud (Alma).

All of the service providers reflected on the lack of funding and resources within the service organizations they served. This was a consistent issue, especially for smaller organizations that lacked sufficient donor support. The lack of diversity was also an issue. These organizations lacked women of color, and there was a need for women in leadership, especially in the African run organizations.
Empowerment

Each of the service providers shared their personal definition of empowerment. Charu defined empowerment as “self-created.” Charu believed that each individual has their own unique way of being empowered, and that empowerment must therefore be “created within” and “defined by the self.” She emphasized the fact that each individual is different, with unique desires, values, and needs. She insisted that individual differences should not be feared or disregarded, but instead recognized and celebrated. Based on Charu’s definition, service providers should be respectful and attentive towards each individual’s personal definition of empowerment, and allow each individual’s definition to guide their practice. She stated,

It's important for me because it's important for her and for her empowerment. It will always be something that an individual has to define for themselves. Otherwise it's not empowerment. Otherwise it's somebody else telling you what empowerment should look like (Charu).

Alma defined empowerment as providing access to resources that young refugee women lacked, and “fighting for [their] representation.” Alma viewed the young women she served as “already powerful,” yet disempowered due to aspects, such as racial discrimination, gender inequality, and other forms of social injustice. She said, “empowerment to me is leveraging resources because I believe that young people, that immigrants, that refugees, that women of color have so much power and um, I think a lot of that power has been taken from them or stolen from them.” Alma emphasized the importance of using resources and space to empower disempowered individuals and communities. She stressed the importance of raising awareness about issues affecting their communities, and fighting for their representation. She also stressed the importance of the young women being creative with the resources they provided and
contributing to their communities. She said, “empowerment for me is creating spaces so that girls can tap into the power of their own communities… to empower them would be providing the resources that the community deserves so that they can be powerful.”

For Nashida, empowerment is providing disempowered young refugee women with the voice and platform they need to achieve their goals. She referred to the young women she served as “the backbone” of their families, yet stated that they many of the women had become voiceless and powerless due to the prevalence of male dominance in their communities. Nashida viewed empowerment as a process of restoring the women’s voice and place within the community and enabling them to achieve their goals. Nashida stated, “women’s empowerment is just giving the women the voice. Encouraging them to seek help if they need it and to go far if they have dreams and aspirations. Giving them the platform.” Nashida’s definition of empowerment is not fixed, but determined based on each individual's goals. It is also described as a cycle, as empowering young women will lead to the empowerment of their families and communities.

Marie defined empowerment in terms of communal support and encouragement. She stated, “empowering is like holding hands, and encouraging them like ‘you can do it.’ Because I think everybody needs someone who can tell them that they can do it.” By referring to empowerment as “holding hands,” Marie implies that power comes from connectivity, mutual support and encouragement. Based on this definition, everyone has a part to play in the empowerment process. Marie stressed that empowerment efforts should not involve handouts but instead focus on helping individuals reach their goals. The result of empowerment should be
those individuals becoming self-sufficient, and eventually contributing to the community by sharing their talents and what they have learned. Marie’s idea of empowerment is very communal. The individual is viewed as deeply intertwined with their community. They are empowered with the expectation that they will not only better themselves but their communities as well. She stated,

If you are into nutrition, help another woman who does not know about nutrition. If you are lawyer, and other women can't give something because they don't have the money, do it for pro bono to support other women. If you do Zumba, or teach Zumba, try and find a time of day where you can get together with other women and do it. Any career or any gift you have, share it with another woman. Because at the end of the day, when you help women, I know they will help other women too (Marie).

For Esther, empowerment involves engagement and the sharing knowledge. She stated,

It's more about guiding them rather than giving them. We’re not giving them the empower, we only guiding them with the power that they have….we're not giving them power, we're not empowering them, we're enhancing their skills. We’re opening doors that you normally wouldn't have opened … We’re helping them see more or use their power in different ways that maybe they wouldn't have used (Esther).

Esther described the young refugee women using terms such as powerful, phenomenal, resilient, and amazing. However, she suggested that they lacked confidence and specific knowledge about how to thrive in the U.S. Her approach to empowerment is providing young refugee women with the confidence and skills they need to achieve their goals.

These girls are so resilient, it's amazing, but they have to be engaged. So if you don't engage them, they don't know where to start. They don't think they are qualified to do anything. Once you open the door over the things they can do, they are incredible. They can become leaders, but you have to guide them there (Esther).

Esther stated that this process must begin with establishing common grounds through listening and relationship building. “Tapping into what they already know” was also an essential part of
this process as she believed that “there's so much that they bring that they've been practicing through time.” It also should involve providing the young women with ample opportunities to support and build upon their learning, as well as encouraging them to share the knowledge and skills they already possess. The result of this process are mutual exchanges that can be enjoyed by all individuals involved, as well as the young women empowering their communities, and making valuable contributions to society at large.

Each of the service providers shared thoughts on the types of empowerment that they believed were problematic and harmful for the communities they served. Esther took issue with the term empowerment and what it implied about refugees and the position of service providers. Esther stated,

I feel like many times we go wrong by assuming that we will. We take people as blank slates. We're so eager. We see them as needy. Oh my God, they need this, they need that. And we forget they also have skills, that they have knowledge, that they are bringing so much to us, we forget that because we are busy trying to empower (Esther).

Esther found that the term empowerment perpetuates the idea that refugees are “deficit” and “blank slates” while service providers take on the position of “putting power on” and fulfilling the needs of refugees, rather than assessing and valuing the knowledge and skills that refugees already possess. Esther's finds that service providers “assumptions” about refugees’ needs, rather than their strengths, leads providers to become “caught up” and “distracted” with an attempt “give” refugees what they already possess. As a result, service providers and organizations “miss out” on refugees’ valuable contributions and “forget to enjoy their assets.” Esther stated,

We really miss out by not valuing the power they come with… They've gone through much that they've learned to survive. They’ve learned to forgive. There's so much that they bring that they've been practicing through time (Esther).
Alma took issue with the term empowerment and the position of service providers as well. What she finds most problematic about the term is the tendency to disregard and/or deny the power that already lies with the individuals and communities served. She stated, “I don’t like the word empowerment because that implies I have power and you don’t. So I’m going to give you power? Not always, that's not always how it is. The reality is I think these girls are really powerful.” Alma also reflected on the positionality of service providers, and how efforts to empower can become oppressive and harmful to the individuals and communities served. She stated,

I’ve learned a lot about our context and like the power dynamics and what oppression is like in this community because there's a lot of like nice complicit people who are going to like give you something and receive an affirmation from you. But when it comes down to it, are benefitting from the same system, that is hurting [you] (Alma).

Alma found that “distanced” service providers and leaders who viewed empowerment as a “noble” cause yet failed to acknowledge and address the issues affecting refugee communities were contributing their marginalization and oppression. She stated,

I’m realizing like how distant the people who are making decisions are from the actual community and how many of the leaders of these organizations don't take the time to learn a language or spend time understanding but rather their experiences with refugees are like kind of exoticized... i'm getting to know them to an extent where I'm like, wow, you have this bracelet from a refugee woman and you like are using it to make your image be cultured and like noble or international. And yet you still don't live in the neighborhood and you make more money than they do (Alma).

Charu further reflected on how empowerment efforts can perpetuate oppression. She found that empowerment efforts that are “bestowed as edict” and strictly based on narrow or fixed models can become disempowering to the individuals and communities intended to empower. She stated,
I don't believe in this white feminist model where they are telling us what empowerment should be for us. I don't think that's fair. I don't think I've ever seen any of my immigrant or refugee clients defining empowerment by those particular standards (Charu).

Charu found that western feminist and empowerment models have “neglected” marginalized voices and ultimately perpetuated the oppression of immigrant or refugee women. She finds that the practice of imposing western values or standards and disregarding alternative narratives is not only problematic but harmful for these communities. She stated,

If we are empowering people in such a way that we are desecrating their way of life, that's not empowerment. If we are making them challenge their entire existence in this way, that's not empowerment (Charu).

Marie reflected on the prevalence of exclusivity and the loss of “humanity” within empowerment efforts. She noted how groups tend to exclude others on the basis on ethnicity or language, and how division ultimately leads to isolation amongst individuals and communities. Marie also noted the tendency of individuals to look down on those that they view as “others” and to view empowerment as one-sided, disregarding their potential to make valuable contributions to society.

For Nashida empowerment is problematic when needs and wants are assumed. Empowerment should not be based on service providers desires, but the individual's own definition. She also stated that empowerment efforts should not contribute to exclusivity and isolation. Empowerment should not be individual focused or narrow with fixed endpoint.

**Improving Empowerment**

Service providers offered recommendations for how empowerment efforts can be improved, especially within marginalized communities. Esther said that improving
empowerment efforts requires changing one’s approach to serving refugee communities. Service providers must learn to see refugees as powerful, assess the unique assets they have to offer, and learn to “value” the “power” that they possess. Providers should also shift their focus from empowering to engaging “already powerful” individuals, and “guiding” them to use their power in meaningful ways.

They are not deficits. They are assets and we need to embrace that and engage with them. And they learn so much faster. They help us. They enrich the country and the space they are in when we let them (Esther).

Marie shared similar thoughts on how changing the way one views and serves refugees communities could improve empowerment efforts. Marie stressed the importance of service providers cultivating compassion and relating to refugees as equals. Service providers should not look down on refugees, but stand beside them and work collectively. By comparing empowerment to holding hands, she implies that there must be mutuality and respect for empowerment efforts to be improved.

I think all of us need eyes for humanity. To see that somebody is a human, like you, something you can do for your sister, or even for your mom. Something you can do for another woman. That's something I feel like I wish everyone can help in anyway that they can (Marie).

Nashida also emphasized the importance of compassion and empathy, and placing the women’s needs at the center of empowerment efforts. She stated that empowerment should not be stagnant but constantly redefined based on the individual’s needs and desires.

For Charu, improving empowerment efforts requires challenging problematic models and approaches to empowerment. Charu found that western ideals perpetuated in traditional feminist and empowerment models were disempowering for refugee women. Charu offered several
recommendations for service providers to address this issue. To begin with, she stressed that service providers must challenge their preconceived notions about empowerment, and eradicate any forms of a saviour mentality. Charu advised,

Really dig deep into your own upbringing and challenge why you feel the way you feel. If you are very stuck on this idea that women's empowerment should look like x, y, and Z, my recommendation is to go back and challenge that very idea. Please do not come in with this colonizing a mindset where you go in and you want to quote unquote rescue people...That is not what we need in this work (Charu).

Instead of service providers being motivated by judgment or the desire to “save,” Charu urged that service providers seek to be humble, honest, and willing to challenge themselves. Service providers should also be willing to meet their clients where they are, and be open minded towards individuals with “non-traditional” or “non-American” values. She stated,

A lot of Americans think that the American way is the correct way and you have to challenge that. You have to. It may seem so benign and in such a benign way, but it's not benign because how you interact with that client really reflects on how you feel about them and yourself in contrast (Charu).

In addition to challenging problematic models and mindsets, Charu stressed that service providers should seek to make themselves and their services “obsolete.” This involves taking a more distanced approach to empowerment, while placing the clients needs and desires at the center of their work. Service provision should not be about making providers “feel good” or them having a “warm fuzzy feeling” but about eradicating the many forms of oppression that are contributing to their disempowerment.

For Alma, improving empowerment efforts involves individuals acknowledging and challenging oppression. Service providers and organizations must acknowledge the various forms of oppression that are affecting refugee women and their communities. This process
requires that workers become “honest” and “real” about the realities that their clients face as well as take the time to gain in-depth knowledge about the root causes of those issues. Providers must also prioritize “creating spaces” for these issues to be discussed and becoming advocates for social change. Alma stated, “It is just as important for me to tutor someone as it is to have space to process and support and advocate for the oppressions that they're facing.”

Alma repeatedly referred to the term “representation” and stressed its importance for service providers working in marginalized communities. Reflecting on her experiences as one of the few women of color within her organization, she stated that representation was a key component that was lacking and something she constantly found herself fighting for. Alma believed that the lack of representation within her organization and others alike could be resolved by being more intentional about hiring more diverse individuals who can personally identify with the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of the young refugee women they serve. Alma stated that these individuals should be “people who understand different pieces of what our realities are, whether that be through a family connection or through an identity, whether or not they're actually refugees.”

**Conclusions**

The service providers in this study reflected on a diverse range of experiences serving young refugee women in Chicago. Their backgrounds as refugee and immigrant women appeared to play a key role shaping their interactions with the communities they served. Having identities and experiences as refugee and immigrant women provided them with a unique perspective of the strengths and challenges of young refugee women, and also motivated
providers to use their knowledge and expertise to bring about positive changes in the communities they served. This was demonstrated in the types of roles that service providers took on, which appeared to be shaped by their personal experiences, as well as specific needs that the service providers encountered during their work.

Service providers each reflected on their personal definitions of empowerment. All of the providers expressed positive views of the young women, and highlighted their strengths and capabilities. Their definitions position young refugee women as key actors shaping their personal empowerment and suggest that their voices, engagement, and participation are essential to the empowerment process. These definitions contradict “victimhood discourses” that portray refugee women as helpless victims and passive recipients within the empowerment process (Dadds 2011; Loftsdóttir 20110). They further challenge the idea of service providers being the “gatekeepers” of knowledge and resources, and support Erden’s (2016) findings that there is a need for a more thorough examination of position of helpers in the empowerment process.

Each of the service providers shared their views on the types of empowerment that they believed were problematic and harmful for the individuals and communities they served. Providers took issue with the term empowerment and what it implied about refugees and the position of service providers. They also found that empowerment approaches that were based on narrow or fixed models that imposed western values and standards can be disempowering to the individuals and communities intended to empower. These findings support Steimel’s (2017) research which states the need for a theoretical shift in the way empowerment is conceptualized and communicated. This requires a recognition of multiple definitions of empowerments from
diverse vantage points, and reconceptualization of empowerment as an open-ended process of engagement that is continuously negotiated (Steimel, 2017).

Service providers offered recommendations for how empowerment efforts can be improved for young refugee women. These recommendations emphasized the need for service providers to value the strengths and capabilities of young refugee women, and to take a more distanced approach to empowerment, while placing the needs and desires of the clients at the center of their work. They suggest that service providers of all backgrounds must challenge their own preconceived notions about empowerment, and seek to acknowledge and address the various forms of oppression that are affecting refugee women and their communities. Service organizations can address this concern by hiring more diverse individuals who can personally identify with the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of the young refugee women they serve, and providing more effective training on subjects such as cultural competence. These recommendations support Erden’s (2016) findings that women of developing countries can play a key role in addressing oppressive roots within women’s empowerment, by facilitating “holistic emancipatory discourses” that can help reposition young women as key actors within the empowerment process.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of the study suggests that service organizations can greatly benefit from the perspectives of the communities they serve. Refugee and immigrant and women can provide a wealth of knowledge and skills needed to improve services for the refugee community. These women can serve as liaisons between refugee communities and organizations. Their voices can
be used as essential guides for improving policy and practice, and for contributing to the eradication discrimination and oppression that hinder empowerment efforts.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

For the purpose of gaining a rich description of service providers experiences, this study focused on a very small number of participants. A larger and more diverse range of participants could provide a wider range of experiences as well as differing perspectives on empowerment, and recommendations for improving service provision for the communities discussed. Including the voices of refugee women who have received these services can also provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the themes explored.
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Service Provider’s Interview Protocol

- Please briefly describe your organization.
  - What services does your organization provide for refugees?
    - Does your organization provide any specific services or programs for young refugee women? Please describe.
- Please describe your role within the organization.
  - In what capacity do you work with young (African) refugee women? Please explain.
- How would you describe the experiences of young (African) refugee women seeking services within your organization?
  - What are their unique strengths?
  - What are their unique needs?
- How has your organization sought to empower young (African) refugee women?
  - Are there any specific practices or models that guide your practice?
- What is going well in service delivery for this population?
  - What approaches or practices have been most effective?
- How might the service delivery be improved for this population?
  - What approaches or practices have been least effective?
- What barriers do young (African) women face when attempting to access services within your organization?
  - How might these issues be compounded by factors such as refugeeism, race, and/or gender?
- What recommendations would you offer for organizations seeking to improve their services for young (African) refugee women?
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Deidra Coleman and I am a student from the Cultural and Educational Policy Studies at the Loyola University of Chicago. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about social services for you’re eligible to be in this study because of you work with this population.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences working with young African refugee women. The interview will take no longer than an hour. This study involves audio recording for the purpose of accurately documenting the information collected.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you’d like to participate or have any questions about the study, please contact me at dcoleman5@luc.edu.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deidra Coleman
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in Research

**Project Title:** Accessing the Gaps: Examining the non/utilization of community-based social services among young African refugee women in Chicago

**Researcher:** Deidra Coleman  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Noah Sobe

**Introduction:**  
You are being asked to participate because of your position as a service provider, and your experiences working with young African refugee women.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

**Purpose:**  
The purpose of this study is to understand how service providers are seeking to serve young African refugee women, and what specific barriers these women face when attempting to access those services.

**Procedures:**  
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in an interview during which you will be asked questions about your experiences working with young refugee women, the barriers you experienced while seeking to serve them, and any recommendations you would offer for improving services for this population. The interview will take no longer than an hour, and will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon secure location that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio recorded.

**Risks/Benefits:**  
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

The information you provide will be useful for both understanding the challenges of young refugee women, but also improving services for them.
Confidentiality:
- The information collected will be kept confidential. Any personal or identifiable details (such as the names of individuals or organizations) will not be used during the reporting of the information collected.
- This study involves audio recording for the purpose of coding the interviews. Only the researcher (Deidra Coleman) will have access to this information. The data will be kept secure. Once the information needed for research has been obtained, the recordings will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in the study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Deidra Coleman at dcoleman5@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor Noah Sobe at nsobe@luc.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

________________________________________________     __________________
Participant’s Signature                                  Date

________________________________________________     __________________
Researcher’s Signature                                   Date
REFERENCE LIST


