Toll of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Primary Caregiver in Yazidi Refugee Families in Canada: A Feminist Refugee Epistemological Analysis

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ABSTRACT   *Existing discourse on refugee resettlement in the West is rife with imperialist and neoliberal allusions. Materially, this discourse assumes refugees as passive recipients of resettlement programs in the host country, thereby denying them their subjectivities. Given the amplification of all social and economic inequities during the pandemic, our paper explores how Canada's response to the pandemic vis-a-vis refugees impacted the everyday of Yazidis in Calgary – a recently arrived refugee group who survived the most horrific genocidal atrocities of our times. Based on interviews with Yazidi families in Calgary and with resettlement staff we unpack Canada's paternalistic response towards refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic. We show how resettlement provisions and social isolation along with pre-migration histories have furthered the conditions of social, economic, and affective inequities for Yazidis. We also show how Yazidi women who were most impacted by the genocide and the subsequent pandemic find ways of asserting their personhood and engage in healing through a land-based resettlement initiative. Adopting a feminist refugee epistemology and a southern moral imaginary as our discursive lenses, we highlight the need to dismantle the existing paternalistic structures and re(orient) resettlement practices and praxis to a social justice framework centering the voices of refugee women and families in their resettlement process.*

KEYWORDS refugee settlement; gender; decolonial analysis; Yazidis; Rohingya; Covid-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020, upended systems of mobility, halting migration across the world (Kluge et al., 2020). It also amplified existing systems of inequalities as shown through research and numerous reports (Goldin & Muggah, 2020). Resettled refugees in countries of the Global North experienced disparate effects of the pandemic given the disproportionately negative impact it has had on the most vulnerable globally (Watson et al., 2020). For instance, in Canada, the pandemic is heavily impacting job sectors that rely on resettled refugees (Center for Global Development 2020; Gelatt, 2020). Resettled refugees also tend to live in inner-city neighborhoods already experiencing urban decline (Carter & Osborne, 2009) and in multigenerational homes, which increased the likelihood of the virus spreading (Krogstad, 2019). This paper explores the impact of COVID-19 on Yazidis – a recently resettled refugee group in Canada. Given the underlying inequities that already exist in the Canadian immigration and refugee intake systems, we unpack how Yazidi men and women are disparately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We adopted Espiritu and Duong's (2018) Feminist Refugee Epistemology (FRE) as our analytical framework because we were are committed to illuminating the everyday lives of Yazidi refugee newcomers to Calgary, the majority of whom are women, underscoring how they simultaneously navigated and resisted the ascribed status of "vulnerable refugees" during the pandemic.

The Yazidis are an ethno-religious group – a non-Muslim and language minority in a Muslim-majority and Arabic-speaking region who have lived primarily in Sinjar in Northern Iraq. They were deeply scarred by the genocide that began in 2014, perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh (its Arabic acronym) (Basci, 2016). Since 2016, the Canadian government has accepted approximately 1,400 ISIS victims, under the Survivors of Daesh program, most of whom are Yazidi (MacLean, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2019). All Yazidis came to Canada as Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) (Wilkinson et al., 2019). Many of the Yazidi refugees were single-parenting mothers with children. Of those, around 265 Yazidi refugees (53 family units) were resettled in Calgary. The majority of these Yazidis were from a farming community in Iraq, and arrived in Canada with no formal education (Banerjee, Coakley et al., 2020; Oliphant, 2018). They speak Kurmanji, a rare Kurdish dialect (Oliphant, 2018).

Our ongoing research shows that because the resettlement of Yazidis in Canada is marked by a deep gendered trauma due to the recent history of genocide, there is a need for gender-specific resettlement services for the community (Banerjee, Coakley et al., 2020; Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2017). In this paper we examine the COVID-19 response toward Yazidi refugees in Canada, keeping in context the gender-specific resettlement services they need. We are specifically interested in unraveling how the social, economic,

and political context of Canada along with Canada's pandemic response to the refugee resettlement process, social isolation of refugees, and their pre-migration histories, produced conditions of oppression and inequity for Yazidis in Calgary. While our goal is to point to conditions that amplified inequities, given our epistemological commitment we centered the agential stories of Yazidi women and men during the pandemic. Our research is based on in-depth interviews with 23 Yazidi men and women in Calgary and with four resettlement staff – a total of 27 individuals. While on the surface Canadian resettlement services are well-organized to facilitate the integration of newcomers (Esses et al., 2021; Moreno et al., 2018), we find that strong gendered impacts of the pandemic threw a wrench into the resettlement goals that settlement agencies had for the Yazidis. The pandemic also laid bare to the resettled Yazidis the gendered precarities of their existence and life in the new society. We contend that full integration of refugees, especially for recently persecuted groups such as Yazidis, should not be premised on the economic concerns of the resettlement country. Through our findings, we argue that we must adopt a *Southern moral imaginary* when formulating policy and programming for resettled refugees, especially during crisis like a pandemic. Our assertion is based on theorization by Banerjee and Connell (2018), and Parekh (2020), who divergently argue for a decolonial and moral framework towards those who have been historically persecuted.

Coloniality, Neoliberalism and Paternalism and Feminist Refugee Epistemology

In the essay **"We Refugees"** Hannah Arendt wrote about the loss of dignity and alienation that is inherently embedded in the refugee experience. She argues that the pain associated with these feelings is most strongly experienced by those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes and thrust into a new hostlands where they must contend with the presumed fragility of their humanity as those relegated to being less than human even in the migration process (Arendt, 1994, p. 115). Arendt (1994) centered dignity in the refugee experience, calling refugees the "vanguard of their people" (p. 117) and advocated for receiving states to create conditions where refugees can preserve their dignity by holding on to the self that was undone as the condition of displacement. Arendt's work has become the foundation of critical refugee studies. Along the same lines, Seyla Benhabib (2004) argues for global justice, such that nation-states redefine their political memberships to be inclusive of asylum seekers, tear down border protectionism, and do away with labels of illegal migrants to uphold the dignity of the displaced.

   This radical call to the nation-state is necessary because the state assumes a paternalistic stance toward refugees (Banerjee, Chacko et al., 2020; Mama, 1998; Owen, 2009). Owen (2009) criticises "the three principal solutions to refugees – repatriation, integration into the society to which they have fled, or

resettlement in a third country" (p. 571), because these principles are based in the discourse of citizenship and statist rights, designed to manage, and control refugee lives to fit the ideals of the receiving society. Parekh (2020) alludes to Arendt's call for centering dignity when receiving refugees, and calls for the adoption of a moral framework that challenges the political structures denying refugees the dignity they deserve in seeking refuge and having sought refuge. This framing is important to reconceptualize who refugees are: not people who need to be rescued or passive recipients of charitable offerings but people who are a "site of social and political critiques of militarized empires" (Espiritu, 2014, p. 174) and other forms of violence and oppression.

These principles take on ideologies of settler-colonialism in states like Canada. Indigenous feminist scholars and activists have long argued that settler-colonial nations like Canada are steeped in (hetero)paternalism that organizes its citizenry to fit and uphold Western, Christian, heterosexual nuclear family relationalities while dis-appearing and disinvesting in any other type of citizenry (Arvin et al., 2013; Smith, 2007; Stasiulis & Yuval-Davis, 1995). Along similar lines, scholars of critical refugee studies claim that Canadian exceptionalism is predicated on its image as a benevolent state, which necessitates the construction of refugees as victims and vulnerable, imperatively dependent on (paternalistic) institutions of the state, and cast as the non-contributing other (Chuong, 2015; Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Lacroix, 2004). For instance, in assessing which Yazidis could be admitted as refugees, the Canadian state required them to be "the most vulnerable" of the Yazidis itself a misnomer for a population subjected to multiple genocides throughout history and the most horrific recorded atrocities in recent times, which resulted in their displacement. This paternalistic perspective leads to the construction of refugees from the Global South as universal dependents (Mohanty, 1998), and the making of a single story through which their resettlement in the host country is structured and portrayed, undoing any possibility of refugee subjectivity.

Another characteristic of settler-colonial Western states like Canada in late capitalism is the reliance and deployment of neoliberal logics toward their populous, especially those considered dependent on the nation, like refugees and migrants (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020). The neoliberal state introduces mechanisms of categorizations among migrants. For instance, Canada's humanitarian migration policy for refugees thrusts them into an economic and political system where they are expected to fend for themselves after a certain period of basic resettlement support (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2020). Additionally, the state frees itself of responsibilities for refugee claimants, differentially leaving them vulnerable to symbolic and material violence and discrimination (Álvarez, 2020). In Canada, owing to the already existing intersectional oppressive matrix of race, class, gender, legal status, non-transferability of human capital and heteropaternalism, refugee women are

relegated to the margins of both economic and social futures (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Hamilton et al., 2020).

Despite the simultaneous interplay of colonialism, paternalism, racism and gender marginalization that encumbers refugee and immigrant subjectivities, refugees and immigrants often reclaim their subjectivities by standing in moral protest against imperial and oppressive immigration regimes (Banerjee, 2019; Espiritu, 2014; Guru, 2019, Menjivar, 2006). Moral protest, as argued by Guru (2019), is a form of resistance led by minoritized groups who leave their home for another geography, defying the state's unwillingness to protect them from oppression. Moral protest makes migration an act of agentic defiance. Given this, we deploy what Espiritu and Duong (2018) call "Feminist Refugee Epistemology" (FRE) as our analytical framework. They say, "FRE relies on a feminist refugee analysis that in Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's (2015) words, 'draws our awareness to routine, intimate and private sites where power is both reproduced and contested' (2015, p. 2)" (Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 588). FRE allows space for analyzing both the intimate everyday lives of refugees, while also reckoning with the public grief that refugees embody by centering their rich and complex lives. FRE also considers the broader transnational context, and the conditions and structures in the receiving country, when situating refugee subjectivities.

As explained earlier, Yazidi refugees in Canada are largely women, framed as vulnerable by the state and placed involuntarily in the vortex of the neoliberal logics and intersectional oppressive structures. Not long after this community was resettled, Yazidis found themselves in the eyes of the storm that the COVID-19 pandemic became over the last year. Drawing on the premises laid out in the FRE, in this paper, we explore two related questions: (a) how has the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Canadian state's response to it affected the Yazidi refugees, especially the main caregivers of the families?; and (b) how has the pandemic added to the complexities of the lives of Yazidi women and men differently, and what have been the affective impacts on their lives?

In attempting to discuss these questions, we argue that the pandemic has emphasized the need to move away from a paternalistic and neoliberal orientation to adopting a Southern imaginary when settling refugees, as posited by Banerjee and Connell (2018). Banerjee and Connell (2018) argue for a world-centered approach (focused on the majority world or the Global South) when discursively engaging in issues of gender, ensconced in a Southern realm and centering coloniality in the analysis. In our case, the Yazidis are ensconced in a framing of gender and kinship fostered in the Global South even as they are thrust into two unfamiliar and insecure spaces: a new country with embedded intersectional inequalities that other them even before they arrive; and a global pandemic that has upended all lives and exacerbated existing inequities (Watson et al., 2020). Any attempt to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on the gendered experiences of this group needs to be framed through a Southern orientation embedded in a moral framework

if we are to move towards more social justice-focused solutions to the inequities experienced by refugees during the pandemic.

Refugee Resettlement in Canada

Canadian refugee policy asserts that to apply for refugee status a person must have faced or feared persecution in their home country and needs protection from experiencing harm including risk to their life (IRCC, 2017). Canada has a well-oiled, bureaucratic system for resettling refugees under the GAR program, which involves a host of local and provincial institutions including local immigration partnerships, Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) holders, and government-supported community-based initiatives (Walton-Roberts et al., 2019). This resettlement network was utilised in full force during the resettlement of Syrian refugees between 2015 and 2017 (Walton-Roberts et al., 2019), while also laying bare the gaps in the system that threw Syrian refugees in a vortex of poverty, racism, intolerance, stress, social isolation, and housing instability (Oudshoom et al., 2019).

Refugee resettlement is largely framed within the ideals of economic or cultural integration, measured through labor participation. Since the adoption of multiculturalism as a policy in 1971, Canadian public institutions have been officially committed to preserving ethnic customs and identities (Kymlicka, 2014). To a certain extent, this has supported the idea of cultural pluralism in Canada. But this pluralism has not necessarily meant that groups like newly arrived refugees automatically experience a sense of belonging, as measured through their economic well-being (Hyndman, 2013). Economic well-being correlates with integration, and is ascertained through human capital factors such as language skills and economic participation (DeVoretz et al., 2004; Goldlust & Richmond, 1974; Kaida, et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). This phenomenon includes three components, namely the ability to get a job, have a job and keep the job (Lam, 1996; Li, 2001), and eventually to acquire financial autonomy (Renaud et al., 2003).

Much debate surrounds the economic integration of marginalized groups such as refugees for whom having access to jobs is as challenging as having the resources to maintain them. One of the challenges in this economic integration focus is "blocked mobility" (Lam, 1996; Li, 2001), which many marginalized groups, especially ethnic and religious refugee groups, experience. Limited language skills, specifically English language proficiency, is identified as one reason constraining refugees from accessing well-paid jobs. While the academic literature acknowledges the structural barriers to economic integration that refugees experience, the governmental and societal rhetoric of economic integration remains largely neoliberal. The onus for economic integration still falls squarely on individual refugee subjects after what refugees claim is an inadequately short period of governmental support (Saheb Javaher, 2020).

Within larger academic discourse, acknowledging structural barriers creates a dominant framing that refugees, particularly groups from the Global South, possess lower post-secondary education, which results in lower economic mobility (Samuel, 1987). While this disadvantage may influence economic integration in predominantly English-speaking countries, studies also show how resources or the lack thereof in the host country are a stronger predictor for why refugees from the Global South struggle to integrate. For instance, in a survey-based study Krahn et al. (2000) found that a majority of refugees from non-English speaking countries were eager to learn English and French in Canada so they could participate in the job market. However, they lacked access to adequate language and job training. Additionally, the study found institutional barriers preventing refugees from transferring skills from their former countries. Employment-related discrimination, including non-transferability of credentials, further pushes refugees, including those who had professional jobs in their old countries, into low-wage service jobs (also, see Beiser & Hou, 2000; DeVortez et al., 2004; Renaud et al., 2003). This has been true for recently arrived Syrian refugees in Canada (Hamilton et al., 2020).

Housing is another area that creates precarity for refugees. Modeling housing stress in Vancouver, Canada, Mendez et al. (2006) discuss the affordability crisis that pushes refugees to accept substandard housing with unstable conditions (see also Francis & Hiebert, 2014). Additionally, the lack of affordable housing makes refugees dependent on public housing characterised by crowded residential conditions (Sherrell et al., 2007). Studies suggest that lack of secure suitable housing creates an additional layer of precarity for refugees in their goal of economic mobility (Carter & Osborne, 2009). Chronic poverty among refugees is well documented. In Canada, newly arrived refugees often struggle to save money because a major share of their income is spent on accommodation (Rose, 2001). A report by Canadian Council for Refugees (2011) pointed to housing as one of the top concerns for refugee integration. Housing vulnerability was found to be acute among refugee claimants who arrived alone and were socially isolated. The report highlights that aside from rising cost and affordability, 37% of refugees experienced unsanitary housing conditions, which worsened their integration experience in Canada. This housing stress is further exacerbated by mental health and trauma-related issues that refugees suffer. A recent study on Syrians and Yazidis in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario found that pre-migration trauma, family composition, and cost of housing contributed to stress related to finding affordable housing (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Durbin et al., 2015). Additionally, segregation, group poverty rates, and housing conditions collectively create concentrated poverty for groups who already experience marginalization in the larger Canadian society (Francis, 2010; Logan et al., 2004; Massey & Denton, 1993; Murdie, 2008). Such unstable conditions add to the precarity that refugees in Canada experience, and also result in a life of stigmatization and

isolation (Galabuzi, 2006, as cited in Francis, 2010, p.1), which is often exacerbated in periods of global crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to note that we use the terminology of "marginalized" despite employing a Feminist Refugee Epistemology approach, because marginalization does not necessarily imply lacking agency or being voiceless. Marginalized refers to intersectional structures that become oppressive for members of historically disadvantaged groups. Previous research on intersectionality has shown that marginalized groups are not necessarily devoid of agency. They access and mobilize agency in creative ways (Banerjee, 2019; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Refugees marshal their socio-cultural, economic, and political resources based on a Southern orientation to retool the otherness they experience in host society when responding to and pushing against the construction of refugeeness (Kyriakides et al., 2018; Kyriakides et al., 2019). This is underscored by Veena Das (2015) when she explicates the ethics of gift-giving in the Global South, showing how Palestinian women, labelled as refugees, would politely decline charitable gifts of old clothes, food, and even money from those they consider outside of their close kin circles, to reclaim the dignity they perceived to have lost in their relegation to the imposed status of being a refugee.

Refugees and the COVID-19 Pandemic

From March 2020 to March 2021, confirmed infection rates related to COVID-19 had been rising worldwide. At the same time, globally, countries were experiencing displacement due to war and conflicts. According to a UNHCR report (2020b), in 2019 itself, there were 79.5 million people displaced worldwide. Of these, 26 million were categorized as refugees, the rest as asylum seekers. Canada, recognized by UNHCR as the world leader in refugee resettlement among the 26 selected nations, took nearly 30,082 refugees. However, since 2019 and the onset of the pandemic, Canada has seen a decline in the number of refugees it has resettled.

In March 2020, as countries started drafting their response to COVID-19, Canada issued an Order in Council describing the pandemic as posing "an imminent and severe risk to public health in Canada," and recommended prohibiting entry of any person from a foreign country who may "introduce or spread the disease" (Canada Order in Council, P.C. 2020-0185). Human rights officials and activists were quick to assess such a sweeping decision, arguing that such measures "violated the fundamental principle of non-derogable human rights" (The Canadian Press, 2020). Refugee International argued that for refugees COVID-19 was a health crisis, a socio-economic crisis, as well as a protection crisis (Dempster et al., 2020). For instance, a November 2020 article in CBC, which, relied on the voices of immigration and refugee activists to advocate that the government resume resettlement programs, mentioned: "Janet Dench, executive director of the Canadian

Council for Refugees, said Canada's continued efforts to resettle refugees are critical because many have recently lost the modest incomes they needed to survive and feed their families" (Harris, 2020).

A few other news articles in Canada during the pandemic centered on issues of family separation. A Toronto Star article by Alhmidi (2021) highlighting the grief of family separation during the pandemic quotes various immigration officials. In positing the government position, they cite Alexander Cohen from the office of the Immigration Minister, who stated, "global migration has been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic and the entire processing system has been operating at reduced capacity." The same article (Alhmidi, 2021) presents a counterpoint, by Jennifer Wan, a Toronto immigration lawyer, who is cited as saying, "the government should prioritize family reunification cases that involve children, especially when the young people are in danger or don't have anyone to care for them."

There were a couple of news stories during the pandemic that portrayed the strength of refugee voices, and both were about Yazidis in Canada. A March 2021 CBC article reporting on Ottawa's decision to reunite families of Yazidi newcomers with their families waiting in refugee camps in Iraq highlighted, "last December, the Yazidi community in Canada and more than a dozen community groups wrote a letter to Mendicino [Immigration Minister], asking for humanitarian aid for those in the refugee camps, and to fast-track applications that would reunite families" (Pauls, 2021). Another article published by the National Public Radio (Arraf, 2020) on the story of a Yazidi mother from Canada who travelled to Iraq during the pandemic to identify her missing daughter through a DNA test, featured the fights a mother took to make the journey. These two stories point at the complexities of refugee lives during the pandemic, and the fights they took on despite the bleakness caused by the pandemic.

The stance taken by Canada during the pandemic is emblematic of a neoliberal perspective that is pro-immigration and seemingly advocating for refugee rights. And yet a finer grained analysis from an FRE perspective reveals that the underlying ideology in these pieces weaves a victim narrative about refugees, positioning them in need of rescue. An alternative to this would be to center a Southern moral imaginary that contextualizes the circumstances of the refugeeness as caused by Western colonialization which makes resettling refugees a moral imperative for Western democracies. This is where our research contributes to show how the underlying neoliberal ideologies embedded in the resettlement process have played out in the gendered lives of Yazidi refugees in Calgary during the pandemic.

Methods

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 23 Yazidi women and men (18 women and five men) in Calgary to explore the economic, social,

financial, mental health, and governmental policy impact of COVID-19 on their lives. We also conducted interviews with four key resettlement agency staff in Calgary regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their Yazidi clients. These interviews were conducted between April 2020 and December 2020, after the pandemic began. The interviews with the Yazidis women and men were conducted by the first author, Banerjee, as the principal investigator, and the third author, Korsha, as part of the research team. Korsha interpreted all the interviews, translating between English and Kurmanji, the Kurdish dialect spoken by Yazidis. The interviews were transcribed in English based on Korsha's interpretation, and the translated interviews were entered in NVivo as text for analysis. One of the limitations of our study has been to base our analysis entirely on the interpreted transcripts instead of the Kurmanji dialogue between the participants and interpreter in the original.

Seven of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, outdoors, and the rest were either conducted over the phone or via Zoom, and were 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews with the two groups are part of an ongoing comparative study that began in the Fall of 2018. The interviews with the four key resettlement agency staff were conducted by Banerjee, who. continued to conduct follow-up interviews with the staff during the course of the pandemic.

The larger research project includes the entire population of Yazidi refugees in Calgary (Canada),[1] which consists of 53 Yazidi families (approximately 265 individuals). The families were recruited through a local resettlement agency (LRA) that is solely responsible for the resettlement of all the Yazidi refugee families in Calgary. When the pandemic began, there was a growing concern about how the lockdown associated with the pandemic would affect the Yazidis in Calgary (especially women) beyond its socio-economic impact, given that most of them were in ISIS captivity for years before being resettled in Canada. Therefore, to understand the impact of the pandemic, the first and the third author conducted follow-up interviews with 13 women (mostly single mothers) and four men to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the community in Calgary.

We used the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze the interview data. What this entailed was iteratively analyzing the data in relation to the past research, our theoretical frameworks, and the narratives of our participants. The literature review provided us with the first level of theoretical sampling to help define tentative analytical categories. The FRE and the southern moral imaginary framework further provided nuances for comparison within the data to produce the

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[1] Seven families refused to take part in our study for various reasons, including hopelessness that positive change will occur as result of the study and damaged relationships with some LRA staff. Also, there was one family that was deemed unsuitable for interviewing, due to their extreme traumatic experience.

analytic frames and themes detailed below. The data were analyzed using open and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in NVivo, which led us to the analytic themes that offer a comprehensive understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on Yazidi refugees in Calgary.

Findings

"Back to Square One": Gendered Economic and Social Impacts of COVID-19

Our interviews with the 23 Yazidi individuals, 14 of whom were single mothers, some with multiple disabled children, about how the pandemic affected their resettlement, reveal specific gendered economic and social impacts that feature differentially among men and women. One of the refrains we heard from a majority of our Yazidi women participants was, "we are back to square one." What they meant is that since they arrived in Canada in 2017, they had made some gains in their English language skills and some younger single women had found jobs in fish and meatpacking industries, jobs considered essential during the pandemic. However, over the first phase of the pandemic lockdown, many of the women who were previously working either lost their jobs or quit because they feared getting infected. The three-month lockdown also had a negative impact on their English levels because a majority of the Yazidis participants said that they were not able to attend English language classes provided by the LRA even after it went online given the carework responsibilities many had toward their children. Gulroz, 32, a mother of three young children, the primary caregiver for her disabled sister, and the head of her household, explained her situation as follows:

> I had found this job in an NGO cooking there and I was also learning English fast because I was meeting people who don't speak Kurmanji and only speak English. But I have now been home for three months and I quit my job because I am afraid of giving the virus to my sister and now I can barely speak any English also. It's like I am back to square one. It's like I am in my first month in Canada. It took me almost three years to make all the progress and now I lost it again. It makes me very scared for my family's future. How will this work?

Gulroz talks about the difficult decision she had to take due to the pandemic and how that jeopardized her family's economic future, because she had to quit her job and also lost much of her English skills. Similar economic insecurities were found among many of the other Yazidi women we talked with. Strikingly, none of the men we spoke with discussed these insecurities or fears about their economic futures, even though two of the men had lost their jobs in the meatpacking industry. Instead, they were concerned with the isolation they were facing and about their children's

futures. They did not talk about economic insecurity. For instance, Binav, a father of two whose sister lived with his family, says,

> I did lose my job, but we are getting government money and the LRA people gave us money and bought us food and if we need anything, we ask them. I am sure I will find something after the pandemic is over. The only problem is I can't meet my Yazidi friends.

When we asked Binav if he was worried about losing his English skills, he added, "I anyway did not have time to go the English classes and now we are on Alberta Works so we don't have to take the English classes, so who cares." Binav and the other men seemed calmer talking about their economic and language losses compared to the Yazidi women. We think this was because the women shouldered the responsibility of resettlement as silent partners of the LRA by taking on caregiving and breadwinning roles for their families. Their care and breadwinning work was an active part of the resettlement trajectory, as it filled gaps in the resettlement process that the government or LRA could not fill (Saheb Javaher, 2020). The men did not take on resettlement-oriented care work responsibilities. The use of gendered labour to fill the care gap is symptomatic of a neoliberal state (Banerjee, 2019; Guevarra, 2011). Additionally, given that the Yazidi family formations in Canada did not align with the Canadian nuclear family structure, the women in these families were forced into gendered labour. They experienced Yazidi gendered cultural expectations while also being the breadwinner of the family due to their situations, but also because that was expected of them as part of their integration process. The Yazidi women we interviewed were also vocal about what they needed from the LRA and were clear on the support they were getting from the government and the LRA, as well as the support they were not receiving but deserved. For instance, Rahat, a 25-year-old Yazidi woman told us:

> The LRA people brought us groceries a few times and arranged for my mother's medical appointments but that is not enough, they should help us with money because we don't have enough money to buy food and or other essentials. How are we to live?

Another mother, Samah, told us that she had asked the LRA for a laptop so that both her children can have a laptop (at the time of the interview only one of her children was given a tablet from school for online classes). She says:

> They bring us here and then treat us like children. They tell us you need this, and you need that but do not listen to what we need. I never went to school, but I have the brains to know that if my two children are in school, they need two laptops for online classes. The government allotted us only one – that is why I say that they think we are children and won't question about anything and just listen to them and be grateful just because we are refugees.

Samah's frustration about not receiving laptops for each of her children is more than just a complaint about poor access to appropriate educational resources for her children. She unequivocally articulates how the state makes her feel like a child, alluding to the paternalism that FRE assigns to the state's treatment of refugees. She also talks about gratefulness as a construct imposed on them. The way Samah speaks and asks for what her family and children need is agentic and brave, which is unsurprising given the upheavals she overcame before coming to Canada. Her strong expression of dissent not only makes her an advocate for her family but also for her community. Mothers like Samah became champions for their communities and families, subverting the statist definitions of who a refugee woman is. These examples show that refugee women often use their everyday, domestic life to make crucial political interventions even during the pandemic.

The rhetoric of personal responsibility that is often associated with refugee resettlement (Dykstra-DeVette, 2018) haunted the Yazidi participants during the pandemic in gendered ways. Jamilah, a single mother of five children with disabilities tearfully relayed that she feels there is an expectation that she will manage her family life on her own, but she does not know how especially during the pandemic. Jamilah said:

> I never depended on anyone to take care of children – being a mother is not that hard. But it is hard in this country. And it is hard during COVID-19. I hate it but I have to ask for help for everything that is outside of the house. With no English and no one to take care of the kids, when I am doing errands outside – like going to grocery, taking the kids to the doctors, going to the bank. Before the pandemic, I was managing because there were more people to help with interpretation but now it is harder. Who likes to beg for help all the time? It is tiring. And when I call agencies, I keep hearing, 'you need to be independent.' I say to them give me an independent medicine along with the vaccine and I will never call you to ask anything. If I could be independent, no one would be happier. I want to tell them, 'let's see you becoming independent in a completely different country in two years.' It's easy to say it to another person.

Most of the women spoke about how the rhetoric of independence and personal responsibility is oppressive and insensitive. They also talked about how the pandemic has made the personal responsibility rhetoric more exasperating.

The few men we interviewed processed this rhetoric with what we call masculine nonchalance. Most said, "we just ignore them when they say be independent," and some said, "we do what we can, what else can we do?" Adil, a husband and father says:

> They say you need to take responsibility. I say we are. I make sure that my family and my people, we wear masks and take precaution – so many here don't do that. We can't do what we can't do – so I don't even bother thinking about it.

This masculine nonchalance is possible because most men in these families are exempt from caregiving responsibilities and none of the men we interviewed were primary caregivers of their family. We did not have enough men in the sample to make any broad claims, yet it is noteworthy that the same rhetoric was processed differently by men and women in the context of the pandemic, depending on their role in their families.

It is also important to note points of convergence. The neoliberal rhetoric of personal responsibility was completely untenable for the Yazidis to even entertain during the pandemic given the constraints they were encountering. And more importantly, even without having the academic language of paternalism or neoliberalism, the narratives of their experiences with the resettlement system made it amply clear how these constructs profoundly affected Yazidis in their everyday lives.

The Canadian government provided support for the Yazidi families during the pandemic, but the emphasis on the rhetoric of integration and personal responsibilities, which is predicated on a neoliberalized resettlement plan (that after a year, refugees would not need government support), put additional pressure on the Yazidi women. They felt they had to not only care for their families' well-being but also worry about their economic futures given the setback. All along, the men shunned this worry and often put it on the women. Gender, therefore, intersected with refugee status, as well as neoliberal and paternalistic ideologies of the state, to produce differential social and economic outcomes for Yazidi women and men during the pandemic.

"It's like the first day of landing here": Gendered Affective Impact of COVID-19

The lockdown also had a detrimental impact on the emotional life and affective expressions in the Yazidi families, and the way these concerns were expressed was predicated on how mental health was constructed within the resettlement program. The Yazidi women talked with us at length about how the lockdown was triggering them by taking them back to the days when they were captured by ISIS and locked-up for weeks and months by their captors. Peri, in conveying this says:

> It's like I am back in that little room where the monster who took me kept me, locked in chains. Sometimes I can't breathe. All the progress I made in my head to feel better is gone now. I feel like it's the first day of landing here when I kept having visions of my captivity.

Almost all Yazidi women we spoke with expressed similar concerns. They felt the intense loss of their loved ones to the genocide, and were impatiently

waiting to reunify with family members still in Iraq, who had been hoping to join them since before the pandemic.

When asked how they coped with these feelings, they said that "they called their LRA counsellor and received sporadic mental health support through the LRA." However, the LRA staff interviewed by the first author were quite concerned about the mental health of the Yazidi women. One of the staff said, "we don't know how much damage this is doing to them and if we will be able to reverse it. It's really like being back to zero with them in terms of mental health."

The situation worsened as Yazidi mass graves were found in Iraq, and bodies of missing Yazidis were being exhumed during April and May of 2020. This incident sent many of the Yazidi women and men over the edge. They pleaded with the LRA staff to make arrangements for them to go back to Iraq, identify the remains of their loved ones and pay homage. This request was denied due to concerns about health, safety and travel restrictions, which soured the relationship Yazidis had with the LRA. For the Yazidis we interviewed, LRA became the face of the restriction. They saw the denials by the LRA as callous and lacking compassion, which caused severe anxiety among both the participants and the LRA staff.

The mental health impact of COVID was a serious issue for the Yazidi women. Notably many of the women had rejected the mental health services provided by the LRA when they first arrived, because they did not see any value in those services. But during COVID, the Yazidi women themselves reached out to LRA staff asking for mental health support. We are not sure if this was a positive step forward for the Yazidi women, but it did move them closer to Canada's stated integration goals of making resettlement services such as mental health resources accessible to newcomers.

Southern Moral Imaginary: Healing Through Land

The affective impact of COVID-19 on Yazidis has been quite severe, but one thing that helped them was their participation in an urban farming project set up by the LRA, named Land of Dreams. This urban farming project brought various communities, including Indigenous groups, immigrants and refugees, together in one initiative, and became a place for healing and forming community through sharing food and social connections. However, in the Yazidi community, only the Yazidi women participated in this land-based project. Many women told us that they feel healed and happy when they work on the land. However, this is ongoing research and the findings are still preliminary. Six women of whom four are single mothers with multiple children have a plot of land they share. When asked what made them go to the farm during the pandemic, one of the women said:

> We were feeling like prisoners at home during the pandemic. And even though it is hard for us to get to the farm because it's so far, we still wanted to… I go there to forget my past and also to fill in my time as it is really boring, we have nothing important to do throughout the day. I also like to go there because we came from a small village where we used to wake up very early in the morning, go to the farm, plant our vegetables, water them, and feed our animals. It was a very beautiful and simple life and I liked it so much. When I go Land of Dreams, I remember those days and feel like I still am living in those moments and nothing bad happened to us.

In this quotation, we see the unfurling of FRE and a southern moral imaginary in nuanced ways. As Espiritu (2014) astutely articulates, the "act of forging a past together across time and space constitutes a feminist refugee practice of 'critical juxtaposing'" (p. 21). Here, the Yazidi women are offering two key acts of subversion, which become visible when interpreted through an FRE lens. First, they are dismantling their trauma-ridden past by agentially remembering, as well as interlacing parts of their past into the present. They extended Canada into the home they left behind, which was intrinsically tied to their connection with the land. Second, while the LRA created this space, the women "owned" it by creatively connecting the past with their present, to subvert the trauma of the pandemic that was taking them back to a past which displaced them. This intentional amassing of disparate memories and stories is an act of subversion embedded in a southern imaginary that Yazidi women performed to navigate multiple structural barriers including the pandemic.

While the study of the urban farming community is a more recent project, we can surmise through the preliminary analysis that this is perhaps the most non-neoliberal, decolonial initiative built, perhaps inadvertently, in a southern imagination in alignment within a moral-framework that does not bullishly push refugee integration, but attempts to build intentional spaces fostering a sense of intrinsic and not imposed belongingness.

Conclusion

In this paper we deploy a feminist refugee epistemological framework to make two key arguments: (1) the underlying colonial and paternalistic ideologies embedded in the Canadian statist institutions toward refugees became more visible during the pandemic, as shown through the case of the Yazidis; (2) in terms of impacts of COVID-19, the Yazidi refugee women bore the brunt of the social, economic and affective outcomes given that women often take on the invisible work of caring for their families and communities, which translates to filling the resettlement gaps left by institutions and governments making resettlement a neoliberal project (Chacko, 2020; Saheb Javaher, 2020).

Our study is limited by having to conduct interviews over Zoom during the pandemic, and by the small number of participants we were able to recruit. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that if we are to dismantle the structures that have created inequitable outcomes for refugees like the Yazidis during the pandemic, the state and its ancillaries should stop treating refugees like victims. Instead, they should meet them at their concerns, co-design a resettlement agenda with them, recognizing their agency in the resettlement process, and making them partners in the fight against the material and emotional impact of the pandemic. Other initiatives like the urban farming project enable refugee women to own their subjectivities through resettlement programming threaded with southern moral imaginary. Such projects align with Yazidi women's values and skills, especially during the pandemic, helping create decolonial, solidarity-based and agentic futures for refugee women beyond the pandemic. Fundamentally reorienting our lens toward refugee resettlement might pre-empt our societies from committing the same injustices in the future that were committed during this current pandemic.

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