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“I Wish Somebody Called Me, Told Me Not to Worry”: Evaluating a Non-Profit’s Use of Social Support to Address Refugee Women’s Resettlement Challenges

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“I Wish Somebody Called Me, Told Me Not to Worry”: Evaluating a Non-Profit’s Use of Social
Support to Address Refugee Women’s Resettlement Challenges

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This report details the qualitative findings from an evaluation of the Refugee and Migrant Women's Initiative (RAMWI) in Tampa, FL. Founded in 2013, the 501(c)(3) provides cultural knowledge and sewing classes to resettled refugee women. Using primarily semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I place a critical lens on the non-profit to examine how refugee women and volunteers use the provided resources and experience the values (e.g., empowerment, vulnerability) RAMWI centralizes in its programs.

Interviews with refugee women, volunteers, and key informants revealed that the challenges RAMWI faces derive from six key areas of contention: 1) an informal organizational structure; 2) the lack of clear communication; 3) transportation; 4) minimal funding; 5) inclusion and participation difficulties; and 6) unclear understandings of empowerment. Many of these challenges revolve around crucial foundational organizational building blocks and thus, make it difficult for RAMWI to self-sustain itself and grow. In order to provide RAMWI with practical considerations and action items for the future, I offer recommendations that take into consideration resources, organizational capacity, funding, and time of implementation. In particular, I emphasize increasing organizational structure; clearer communication; and refugee women's inclusion and participation not only in classes, but also in designing the growth of RAMWI.

1. INTRODUCTION

This project is the result of many conversations between the founder of the Refugee and Migrant Women’s Initiative (RAMWI) in Tampa, Florida and the author regarding the organization’s needs and future projects. As a grassroots, volunteer-based organization with the desire to grow, RAMWI requested this evaluation to outline its next steps forward and gather participant input regarding the structure and relevancy of the organization’s core programs. The project was initially intended to combine an evaluation and my personal interests in volunteer and refugee women’s understandings of those concepts most central to RAMWI’s mission statement—empowerment, self-sufficiency, and vulnerability; however, COVID-19¹ greatly limited the scope of this project. Because of the challenges that ensued, this project was adapted as a pilot evaluation to serve as a foundation from which to further evaluate the organization’s impact in the refugee community. The evaluation had three central objectives: 1) to assess whether RAMWI is meeting its stated goals in a manner that aligns with the needs of the refugee women it aims to help; 2) to identify RAMWI’s strengths and areas of improvement; and 3) to compile a list of volunteer and refugee women’s ideas and recommendations as to how to solve challenges related to identified areas of improvement.

This evaluation primarily focuses on the organization’s two primary services—the monthly support groups and sewing classes—although I also address ambiguities surrounding the organization’s other services within the context of volunteer roles and organizational

¹ COVID-19 stopped all monthly support groups and sewing classes from March 2020 – December 2020. It also prevented the author meeting refugee women participants and volunteers in-person as well as observing their interactions during RAMWI programs.

capacity. I used an applied anthropology approach to centralize volunteer and refugee women's experiences and relationships with the organization. Adopting an applied anthropology perspective allowed me to study the underlying interactions between volunteers and refugee women and how such interactions impact their experience with RAMWI.

This evaluation shows how RAMWI can use its strengths to overcome barriers and strategically organize its next steps forward for the upcoming years. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the evaluation addresses three primary questions:

1. How is RAMWI addressing the needs of refugee women from diverse cultures and what aspects of services can they strengthen?
2. Is RAMWI effectively prioritizing its material and human resources to meet the needs of refugee women?
3. Do refugee women find that RAMWI is meeting their needs? If so, in what ways? If not, what recommendations do they have to help RAMWI achieve this goal?

In answering these questions, the evaluation addresses four key areas of focus: effectiveness, relevancy, safety, and communication. Simply put, effectiveness refers to how well RAMWI meets refugee women's needs. For the purposes of this report, relevancy is not only whether RAMWI's programs are grounded in the women's experiences as refugees, but also in how women are included in the creation, design, and future of provided classes. Safety addresses both physical safety (do women feel safe during classes?) and privacy (do women feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics such as women's health?). Finally, the communication focus will evaluate how RAMWI communicates with both its volunteers and refugee women participants as well as whether volunteers and refugee women feel they can talk about their needs and wishes with the founder.

I aimed for this evaluation to include a practical aspect that the founder could refer to over the years for ideas and reminders as to how volunteers and refugee women envisioned the growth of RAMWI. To fulfill this goal, I conclude the evaluation with practical short- and long-term suggestions to convey what the organization could do to improve services to refugee women within the Tampa Bay Area.

2. BACKGROUND AND PROFILE OF ORGANIZATION

RAMWI Profile

The Refugee and Migrant Women’s Initiative (RAMWI) is a volunteer run 501(c)(3) that serves refugee women in the Tampa Bay area. The founder² created RAMWI in 2013 in response to growing integration needs expressed by refugee women in Tampa Bay. Its mission is to “enhance the lives of refugee and migrant women in the community by providing an opportunity to heal, engage with others while learning the skills necessary to become self-sustainable, organize, and advocate for themselves” (ramwi.org, 2018). The organization offers support and skills training services that help enable women to more confidently navigate their new communities in the United States. Since its inception, RAMWI has provided services to over 400 refugee and migrant families from 17 different countries including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Afghanistan, Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic, Uganda, Nigeria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Haiti (Ramwi.org).

The organization’s primary services are a monthly support group and sewing classes. Monthly support groups meet once a month and provide classes on a variety of topics that help refugee women better navigate their new communities and gain social support. Because of the significant effect trauma has on refugee women’s overall well-being and integration (Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Haffejee and East 2016; and Qutranji et al. 2020), RAMWI’s curriculum centralizes health literacy and coping mechanisms, although other topics can include personal

² The founder’s name is redacted to help anonymize the evaluation.

finance and K-12 education. To help eliminate barriers to attendance, RAMWI provides transportation and a youth support group that meets at the same time as the monthly support group. While monthly support groups focus on challenges associated with access to services and social support, sewing classes address the economic self-sufficiency barriers refugee women face by providing participants with an extra skill set with which to gain income. Over the course of a 10-week period, women learn the basics of sewing, a sewing machine, and business.

The Founder

The founder's personal experience as a West African immigrant as well as her active participation in the refugee resettlement industry as a refugee services provider and member of the Tampa Bay Refugee Task Force gives RAMWI unique insight into refugees' experiences resettling in the US. Her participation with and connections across resettlement agencies in the Tampa Bay as well as state and federal agencies allow her to be in constant conversation with refugees and witness the limitations of the resettlement program. Her dual role in the state and VOLAG arenas creates a continuous feedback loop that informs RAMWI's monthly meeting presentations and sewing classes. The founder in turn passes on the individual needs of each family that she gleans from her health department position or RAMWI events, and together the resettlement agencies and the founder brainstorm ways they can meet unmet needs within the community.

Organization Background

The Tampa Bay Area of Florida encompasses Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas counties and has a total population of 2.8 million (data.census.gov). Between 2015 and 2019, Tampa Bay resettled a total of 172,653 asylum, refugee, and special visa arrivals from 58 different countries (myflfamilies.com 2019). In Fiscal Year 2019 (FY2019) the Florida Department of Children and

Families reported a total of 788 new refugee arrivals, 194 of which resettled in the Tampa Bay Area. The state of Florida does not provide a breakdown of resettled refugees by gender, but the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) reports that about 50% of global refugees are women.

As a result of budget cuts during the Trump administration, Tampa Bay had only two refugee resettlement providers—Lutheran Services Florida and Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services—at the time of this evaluation (Holbrook et al. 2019; myflfamilies.com 2019). With increasingly diminished resources, refugee families were tasked with much of the resettlement process and forced to make difficult sacrifices regarding family, education, and employment (Besteman 2013; Baer and Holbrook 2017; Holbrook et al. 2019; Mahoney et al. 2020).

Throughout the US, the language barrier proves to be the largest and most difficult obstacle resettled refugees face, preventing many from acquiring well-paid jobs, degree re-certifications, and communicating with schools, healthcare, social services, and employers (Fadiman 1997; Warriner 2007; Baer and Holbrook 2017; Parajuli 2019; Shrestha-Ranjit et al. 2020). Refugees in the Tampa Bay Area expressed additional issues including “food insecurity, school harassment and bullying, lack of non-food household items, lapsing or unused food assistance benefits, low attendance rates at ESOL classes, sexual harassment among adults, and changes in gender roles” (Holbrook et al. 2019, 15).

Independent 501(c)(3)s, or non-profits, have emerged in Tampa Bay to address these issues that have proven increasingly difficult for the two refugee service providers to tackle due to the inflated gap in resources that has only grown wider over the last couple of years (Mahoney et al. 2020). Because limited resources restrict the aid federal agencies and resettlement organizations can provide to select areas of need, partnerships between private non-profits, state

agencies, and faith organizations in Tampa Bay are critical to refugees receiving well-rounded services upon arrival.

In response to the growing need for local collaboration and addressing the resource gaps associated with the resettlement program, the Florida Department of Children and Families initiated the Refugees Services Task Force. For over 40 years, the coalition of organizations and agencies have met throughout the year to discuss best practices, challenges refugees face in the community, community events, and possible solutions to meeting refugee needs (myflfamilies.com 2019). As a member of the Task Force, RAMWI not only gains much of its support from federal agencies and private non-profits through its involvement, but also access to shared resources and a continuous feedback loop regarding community challenges.

The founder envisions RAMWI as a secondary resource for the refugee community, a place where women can congregate and ask questions about American culture, public services, health, and safety. The organization strives to be self-aware of its limitations and never provides a resource someone else already provides. For this reason, the non-profit primarily offers knowledge that can aid refugee women to better understand and use foundational resources such as Medicaid, food stamps, American schools, the fire department, and the local police.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the value RAMWI places on the social support aspect of its services, this report also provides a literature review of creative projects that other refugee organizations have undertaken to integrate refugee perspectives into solutions for integration-related barriers. The goal is to provide a starting point from which RAMWI can brainstorm ways it can increase refugee women's participation into new areas of its curriculum. I emphasize the need to explore projects and recommendations outside the scope of refugee resettlement providers and the R&P program. In recognizing the limitations of overburdened personnel and underfunded programs, the review focuses on community projects that work alongside refugee service providers to better address specific resettlement needs. In addition, I critique understandings of the concept of empowerment, to encourage RAMWI to think about what it means for their organization to empower refugee women in the local community and about whose definition of empowerment they use to guide their work.

Organization and Critiques of Refugee Resettlement

The US federal government defines a refugee as a “person outside his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return [...] because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (dhs.gov 2020). The Refugee Act of 1980 is the overarching legislative foundation of refugee resettlement in the US (Zucker 1983). Although it operates through three different departments —the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the Department of State

(DOS)—the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) under the DHHS and the Reception and Placement Program (R&P) under the DOS are the two guiding principles of the US resettlement program (Zucker 1983; ORR 2012; USCIS 2017; Bond and Kwadrans 2019; and USDOS 2019).

The R&P program is the initial funding program that provides contracted resettlement providers with a one-time payment per refugee individual to pay for the first three months of expenses (USDOS 2019). The contract between the DOS and refugee resettlement providers requires that providers assist refugees in finding housing and furnishings, enroll in employment services, connect refugees to government resources, apply for Social Security and ID cards, enroll children in school, and find language classes within the first 90 days (DOS 2019). Once the first 90 days finishes, refugees are no longer eligible for funding under the DOS but can continue to receive eight months of medical assistance; employment services for up to five years; social services such as food stamps; and longer-term cash under the ORR (DOS 2019; ORR 2012).

Similar to development institutions in former colonies, refugee resettlement functions through a blueprint model in the United States (Roe 1991). All refugees regardless of culture, country of origin, reasons for fleeing, economic circumstances, or social connections within the US are subject to the same methods and goals as dictated by the Reception and Placement (R&P) program. As recent development theory argues, such blanket solutions that adopt ahistorical and apolitical foundations tend to fall short of their goals and often create new problems due to the lack of a holistic perspective (Ferguson 1990; Roe 1991; Escobar 1995; Schuller 2016). Independent non-profits have emerged to address these gaps in service left from the blueprint model, often recontextualizing integration needs within the cultural perspectives of resettling

refugees (Siddiquee and Kagan 2006; Nazzal et al. 2014; Klenk 2017; Kyuchukov and New 2017; and Renner et al. 2020).

For decades, anthropologists have critiqued the limitations of the “refugee” label as well as the US resettlement program for its failure to fully evaluate and cater to the culturally specific needs of arriving refugees (Zetter 1991; Malkki 1995). Studies investigated the role of the R&P program’s self-sufficiency requirement, physical and mental health services, and citizenship making discourse (Keely 1992; Simich 2003; Koyama 2004; Keles 2008; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Cannedy 2011; Grace et al. 2017; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; and Parajuli et al. 2019), detailing both the experience of refugees from specific countries and the generalized experience of resettlement agencies.

The DOS defines successful resettlement as economic self-sufficiency (Uehling 1992; Keles 2008; Kerwin 2012; state.gov 2019). Research critiquing the US refugee resettlement program touches on five main barriers to successful resettlement as defined by the DOS: 1) language, 2) lack of social support, 3) trauma-related mental health stressors, 4) emphasis on economic self-sufficiency, and 5) lack of knowledge about how to navigate a new cultural system (Uehling 1992; Fadiman 1997; Ong 2003; Keles 2008; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Cannedy 2011; Mirza et al. 2013; Grace et al. 2018; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; and Owino and Weber 2019). The identified barriers are in no way independent and in fact intersect in impactful ways so as to influence further consequences such as social isolation and the inability to access health care, education, and adequate wages (Fadiman 1997; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Hatoss and Huijser 2010; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019; Owino and Weber 2019; Shrestha-Ranjit 2020). When considering gender, additional barriers further compound women’s resettlement experiences including shifting gender roles, family responsibilities, histories of sexual violence,

and formal education backgrounds (Warriner 2007; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Hatoss and Huijser 2010; Koyama 2014; Haffejee and East 2015; Wachter et al. 2016; Klenk 2017; and Shrestha-Ranjit 2020).

However, in their criticisms of the resettlement program and its implementation through local service providers, much of the research fails to take into account that contracted refugee service providers are also unique groups of individuals that, like refugees, are not identical. Leadership; the backgrounds of case managers; compassion fatigue; the “one-size-fits all” model of the R&P program; and depleted funds, resources, and federal backing (Brown and Scribner 2014; Scribner 2017; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019) all greatly restrict resettlement providers’ available options to meet the specific needs of refugee women. More importantly, macro-level critiques that focus on policy and federal programmatic changes do little to offer effective, feasible projects that resettlement providers can implement and make a difference at the individual level. The R&P program’s failure to adapt over the last 40 years (Brown and Scribner 2014) is staunch evidence of the inflexibility of the US resettlement program. This is why organizations such as RAMWI that complement and act in close partnership with resettlement providers are important actors within resettlement communities, and why critiques that offer recommendations in concert with provider limitations are better suited to guide effective change to refugee resettlement in the US.

The research and projects highlighted in this section demonstrate alternative solutions to the R&P program gaps that incorporate local resource providers such as community health centers to work alongside refugees and contracted resettlement providers. More specifically, they adhere to Ager and Strang’s (2008) framework of integration in which knowledge flows in two directions with both refugees and non-refugees contributing to their interactions and

surroundings. Under this understanding of integration and the extra help provided by community partnerships, integration becomes a dialogue and eases the pressure placed on refugees to educate themselves on American cultural systems.

Community Partnerships and Refugee Health

In 2009, the Santa Clara County Department of Mental Health awarded the Center for Survivors of Torture Department of Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI CST) the \$2.6 million New Refugees Project grant to create culturally competent and community-based prevention and education mental health programming for the nine largest refugee communities in the local area (Nazzal et al. 2014). Central to this project was tasking each of the recruited refugee community partners (Afghans, Burmese, Chinese, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Indians, Iranians, Iraqis, and Vietnamese) with building the prevention and education mental health interventions for their own communities. While the AACI CST made itself available as a resource to the community partners, they placed the decision making and data collection power in the hands of the communities.

Not all designed programs were successful, but several of the refugee communities creatively combined the topic of mental health with cultural value to destigmatize mental health. Notably, the Eritrean and Ethiopian community partners choreographed a one-woman dance using movement and music from the African region to illustrate the “life of a woman in premigration Africa, her initial post-resettlement elation, the depression she experienced when she realized the reality of her new life in a foreign country, and the hope she found when she accepted treatment for her depression” (Nazzal et al. 2014, 483). The use of storytelling through dance and music not only acted as models of communication, but demonstrations of culture and a

familiar way to engage individuals in a topic they are not comfortable addressing or is culturally stigmatized.

In analyzing this project, it is important to note its pool of funding and its leadership by a non-contracted resettlement service provider. Nazzal et al. (2014) were upfront about the new opportunities the \$2.6 million allowed, including paying community partners for their work, and the long-term advocacy effort it took to successfully win such a grant. Critiques of the resettlement program often do not consider the funding feasibility of their recommended changes, nor the strict outcome measures the R&P program places on resettlement providers within the first 90 days of arrival (Brown and Scribner 2014; Scribner 2017). This latter point is important when analyzing who is asked to make changes in response to critiques. The AACI CST was successful in piloting the New Refugee Project because it was not split between immediate resettlement responsibilities such as housing and employment, but rather worked as a complimentary community service to resettlement providers.

Geltman and Cochran's (2005) research on the Massachusetts Refugee Health Assistant Program (RHAP) demonstrates how specialized community partnerships can not only better address the health needs of arriving refugees, but ease service provider responsibilities. Created by the Department of Public Health, RHAP is a "network of private clinics, mostly federally qualified community health centers, specially qualified for screening refugees—a 'preferred provider network'" (Geltman and Cochran 2005, 197). In concentrating initial refugee care to a shared network rather than local health departments, the program developed specialized staff that aided clinics in adapting to diverse refugee populations and more importantly, transitioned refugees to primary health care. This program had the added benefit of no longer requiring resettlement providers to manage health department referrals nor refugees to learn several

different health care systems or locations, and increased the number of refugees accessing health care. While the RHAP was initially designed to solve the delays associated with the required arrival health screenings, it became a network of providers trained in delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate care (Geltman and Cochran 2005, 197).

Bond and Kwadrans (2019) explore creative solutions to the need for increased social support for resettling refugees under the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI), which was built to explore the creation of community sponsorship resettlement models. They define community sponsorship as “programs that empower groups of ordinary individuals—as opposed to governments or professionalized agencies—to lead in welcoming, supporting, and integrating refugees” (Bond and Kwadrans 2019, 88). Canada, the UK, Argentina, Ireland, Spain, and New Zealand have either taken steps or already implemented different forms of community sponsorship models and in the process, created what Bond and Kwadrans (2019) believe to be a stronger link between refugee and local host communities. In transferring resettlement services to the community, resettlement “becomes a project of collective interests: the newcomers’ success is inherently also the sponsors’ success” (Bond and Kwadrans 2019, 88).

The US has yet to design a formal national program, but several refugee service providers created what Bond and Kwadrans (2019) call community-level co-sponsorship, a partnership between community groups to take primary responsibility of integrating certain refugee families (94). Certainly, the community co-level sponsorship in Connecticut is notable, but what Bond and Kwadrans (2019) overlook is how many refugees US cities resettle in a year. What the UK accomplished in community sponsorship is not necessarily feasible when looking at states such as Florida which resettled 16,704 refugees from 2013 to 2018 (myflfamilies.com 2019). Florida’s numbers are 67% of the total number of refugees the UK resettled as a whole in the

same time period (25,000 total refugees; Bond and Kwadrans 2019, 90). This difference is even more exacerbated when looking at those cities that receive refugees throughout the state. Tampa Bay resettled 4,126, or one fourth, of those refugees arriving in Florida. This does not mean community co-sponsorship or a derivative thereof is not possible in larger cities, but it is important that proposed solutions consider how much larger the US refugee resettlement program is than other countries. While the size of the US resettlement program puts limitations on Bond and Kwadrans' (2019) proposed community co-sponsorship idea, the strength of their solution lies in its creativity to look for ideas beyond refugee service providers who are already overburdened with the conflicting needs of refugees and government requirements.

For such instances of high numbers of resettlement where community sponsorship (and the private citizen funds that support such sponsorship) are not necessarily capable of economically sustaining large numbers of individuals, organizations like RAMWI are critical because they create a social space where refugees and host communities can engage one another, while also providing important services that refugees need to navigate a new culture. In a project on culturally tailored health promotion groups with Cambodian refugees, Berkson et al. (2014) found that spaces that centralize discussion around refugee participant viewpoints not only acknowledge the value of cultural history, traditions, and practices, but also improve refugees' sense of well-being and access to resources.

Similarly, resettled refugees in a UK study on integration explained that sharing their own culture with others promoted mutual understanding and created the feeling that they contributed something of value to the integrated community (Ager and Strang 2008, 183). The study additionally found that giving refugees the chance to interact and share with local

communities alleviated the alienation and depression resettling refugees experience when arriving in host countries (Ager and Strang 2008).

Gender and Resettlement

The projects highlighted thus far focus on specializing programs by culture, language, or ethnic groups, but scholars argue that refugee women have differing needs than men that require gender-specific solutions (Martin 2004; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Koyama 2014; Wachter 2016; Parajuli et al. 2019; and Shrestha-Ranjit et al. 2020). Deacon and Sullivan (2009) argue that the male-centered paradigm of the resettlement program neglects women and their gendered experiences during flight, including less formal education than men and significant physical and mental trauma inflicted by sexual violence. Additionally, women need to adjust to new gender roles and responsibilities beyond their traditional gender expectations and have a greater lack of social support due to a diverse range of cultural stigmas that may “render it difficult for them to become part of the larger refugee communities” (Deacon and Sullivan 2009, 274).

Overall, these gendered specific barriers create greater needs for refugee women in the areas of language, social support, finances, and the ability to access government services and community resources (Deacon and Sullivan 2009, 276). Of significant note, was Deacon and Sullivan’s (2009) finding that social support sat at the foundation of these needs and “significantly correlated with [refugee women’s] ability to access help for their needs in resettlement” (278) and feelings of loneliness. In Wachter et al.’s (2016) work with Congolese refugee women, the lack of social support translated to feelings of disempowerment and being overwhelmed.

Gender and Communication

Even those women that have social support in host countries face unique challenges in whom they have access to for help, and how their requests for help affect their social relationships. For example, many women rely on their children to navigate their cultural surroundings and language, which causes a sense of dependency that compromises their role in the family (Parajuli et al. 2019).

Refugee women's dependency on their children causes difficulties in health care settings in which women feel uncomfortable describing sensitive health issues to their children for translation (Shrestha-Ranjit et al. 2020). Bhutanese women in New Zealand described the use of child translators in health care settings as violating traditional practices related to their religion, and was a consequence they weighed before deciding to access health services (Shrestha-Ranjit et al. 2020, 1701). Even when they did have access to in-person services though, Shrestha-Ranjit et al. (2020) found that female interpreters were rare, even during childbirth and female exams. Interpreters tended to be male community members the Bhutanese women knew and subsequently felt ashamed of later encountering them outside of the clinics. "I had to share many of my personal and sensitive matters in front of him as there was not any Nepali female interpreter in the hospital. I did that for survival although I needed to hide my face and eyes as I was so ashamed" (Shrestha-Ranjit et al. 2020, 1701). These experiences indicate that while social support in general is important, it is necessary to have a holistic support system that can address the various aspects of women's lives and needs.

Empowerment

Projects addressing the unique and diverse needs of refugee women often focus on the concept of empowerment. Not only is empowerment rarely defined, it is also unclear as to what

successful empowerment looks like in women participating in these projects. For example, the Australian report, *Empowering Migrant and Refugee Women: Support and Empowering Women Beyond Five-Year Post-Settlement*, was designed to evaluate practical strategies to empower refugee and migrant women in Australia, but never clearly defined empowerment nor how the participating community project stakeholders understand empowerment. Failure to define empowerment and how it plays out in an individual or community is particularly precarious for program evaluation (Page and Czuba 1999) and project implementation as it suggests the lack of a clear vision as to what project participants are working towards.

Empowerment on both the individual and community level is a social process that links the individual to the community by fostering “power in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society” (Page and Czuba 1999). Founded on Lappe and DuBois’ (1994) “relational power,” or power that is shared, empowerment is a process that involves relationships and group participation, mutual respect, and critical reflection (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570; Page and Czuba 1999). And finally, empowerment is multi-dimensional in that it can occur beyond the individual, or even groups of individuals, on the community and organizational level (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995).

Empowerment is subjective in that individual values, experiences, and the socio-political environment in which they are embedded affect what actions, activities, or structures individuals consider empowering (Perkins and Zimmer 1995). Thus, each project addressing refugee women’s empowerment will have its own understanding of not only how the community will interact to achieve empowerment (the process), but also the outcomes of these interactions. It is important however, that whatever the understanding of empowerment, projects focus on

“identifying capabilities instead of cataloging risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems instead of blaming victims” (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570).

Empowerment and Refugee Resettlement

Through an online questionnaire and qualitative interviews with resettlement service providers and local community organizations, De Maio et al. (2017) found four best practices to provide “empowering” services to refugee women: “responding to clients in a culturally responsive way; responding to clients in a gender responsive way; promoting the social engagement of clients in the community; and encouraging skill development in clients” (De Maio et al. 2017, 42). While several of these best practices include elements of empowerment as described above, there are several severe limitations to De Maio et al.’s (2017) government report.

First and foremost, this report did not include refugee or migrant women’s opinions or experiences. De Maio et al. (2017) acknowledge this as a limitation, but if empowerment is truly the goal, then best practices and gaps in services should be determined in collaboration with those individuals receiving services. This is critically important when we recognize that empowerment is a contextual process. What a service provider may find empowering is not necessarily the same as that of a refugee woman with a different background. Empowerment requires collaboration and so must start with communication with those you seek to help empower to define not only the process, but also the outcome.

Empowerment outcomes are culturally and contextually defined (Klenk 2017) so that when organizations set expectations of “success” for resettling refugees, they run the risk of promoting host country empowerment narratives. By using Australian women’s participation in the economy as a measurement of comparison for successful empowerment, the De Maio et al.

(2017) silenced resettling refugee women's goals for success and personal values. Increased participation in the economy is not empowerment. It can be an outcome of empowerment if desired by the individual in question, but it is not the sole result of empowerment. Klenk (2017) cautions that measuring refugee women with diverse values and goals against normative behaviors of host countries "has the potential to undermine those empowerment processes refugee women take within familial dynamics [...]" (Klenk 2017, 171). As Klenk's (2017) work poignantly demonstrates, many refugee women practice "gendered behavior in terms of caregiving and domestic duties" (Klenk 2017, 171) and value these roles.

Empowerment Through Social Connections

In studying the Manchester Women's Electronic Village Hall (WEVH) Community Internet Project (CIP), an internet skills class for refugee women, Siddiquee and Kagan (2006) ground empowerment in various online and physical community spaces. Although they use an unclear definition of empowerment, they do characterize the CIP's understanding of the intersection between the internet and empowerment as a communal space of dialogue and participation. The six refugee women enrolled in the class used their new internet skills to communicate with their communities in their own languages and search for information "regarding the local community, educational opportunities, and current affairs from their country of origin" (Siddiquee and Kagan 2006, 14-15). Siddiquee and Kagan (2006) argue that these practices reduced isolation through the recuperation of social support networks; fostered localized support networks; connected the students to local government services and local community information; increased employment prospects; and aided the women in maintaining links with their country of origin (15).

In designing links to various communities, the women gained “greater autonomy and control around the experience of living in the UK” as well as access to knowledge and resources (Siddiquee and Kagan 2006, 24). The internet acted as a simple way for each woman to creatively navigate online communal spaces in a manner that was meaningful for them, demonstrating an individualized outcome to a generalized process of empowerment.

As mentioned above, Klenk (2017) argues for this individualization of empowerment, stating that arbitrarily set goals that do not include input from target communities run the risk of not being valued by project participants (Klenk 2017, 170). She cautions that as an external objective, empowerment could impose “normative or homogenous ideas of empowerment on the diverse needs and aspirations” of refugee women (Klenk 2017, 171). Klenk’s (2017) work with refugee women who attended English classes at a community center in South London contends that social spaces that affirm diasporic identities through discussion and give practical support (such as education and childcare) function as a bridge between internal and external spaces, and aid in the overall integration process (Klenk 179, 2017).

Empowerment-centered projects have emerged throughout several resettlement countries as a popular technique to provide support to refugee women (Jabbar and Zaza 2016; De Maio 2017). Empowerment, however, is often defined without input from refugee women nor tailored to the individual and cultural values of the refugee women. Indeed, those projects and groups that grounded their services in collaborative empowerment processes between refugees and host communities demonstrated increased community integration and confidence on the part of refugee women (Siddiquee and Kagan 2006; Hatoss and Huijser 2010; Klenk 2017).

The highlighted projects above demonstrated the importance of collaboration not only between organizations and refugees, but also between organizations. Community partnerships

such as the Massachusetts Refugee Health Assistant Program (RHAP) and AACI CST that pooled resources and cultural knowledge expertise between refugee communities and community organizations reported improved community engagement and services. The successful programs treated collaboration as an ongoing goal and included refugee communities in the design and implementation of their deliverables. In particular, the adoption of program designs that centralized *continuous* collaboration aided the successful programs in avoiding assumption-based curricula and including refugees' cultural values and knowledge within program design.

4. METHODOLOGY

This evaluation utilized a qualitative research methodology in order to capture an emic (or insider) interpretation of volunteer and refugee women's experiences with RAMWI. For the purposes of this project, these methods included semi-structured interviews, analysis of archival data, and participant observation. Most specifically, the evaluation began with analyzing RAMWI's overarching mission and strategy, followed by an investigation of their implementation by volunteers and interns. I finalized the project by gathering refugee women's and volunteers' opinions of the services RAMWI provides to the community. Starting the evaluation at RAMWI's organizational level allowed me to view the programs' life cycle and permitted a detailed comparison of RAMWI's intentions and how those play out on the ground.

From July 2020 until February 2021, I analyzed archival data; interviewed twelve volunteers and nine refugee women using open-ended, semi-structured techniques; and participated in ongoing virtual volunteer meetings, two RAMWI classes with refugee women in January and February 2021, and one food distribution event at a local church in October 2020.

Sampling Strategy

Due to the small size of the organization, the founder acted as the sole mediator between me and potential participants. The founder compiled and provided me with two lists of potential participants—one made up of volunteers, board members, and key informants and another of refugee women. Both lists included both current and former members of RAMWI. Each provided list was different in nature and thus, required different sampling strategies.

I recruited and interviewed nine refugee women for this evaluation using convenience sampling, a method that allows selection of project participants from accessible groups of individuals (Schensul and LeCompte 2013)³. With the help of the volunteer coordinator, the founder created a list of 35 women consisting of current and former sewing group participants as well as monthly support group participants. Unfortunately, RAMWI only had phone numbers available for 20 of the 35 women, which further limited the sample. Nine of the 20 women responded to interview requests. To adapt to these constraints, I changed my methodology to include convenience sampling. The pandemic prevented me from using additional sampling methods to strengthen this sample size because I was unable to recruit and build trust with the women at in-person meetings. The limitations of convenience sampling on data collection are detailed below.

For the sample of volunteers who work with RAMWI, I recruited participants using quota sampling supplemented by snowball sampling (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). Quota sampling is a method that selects “representatives from all known sectors or categories within a population” (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 295). While not particularly reliable for large populations, quota sampling has the benefit of highlighting group variation (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 296). Snowball sampling, or chain referral selection, built on the above convenience sampling by inquiring for contact suggestions from already active participants (Schensul and LeCompte 2013).

³ I originally planned to utilize a systematic sampling of all refugee women participants at RAMWI using a sampling interval determined by the number of available refugees divided by desired sample size (n=25; Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 301). Following discussions with the founder, I decided against systematic sampling to match her desire to select a list of potential evaluation participants.

Similar to the refugee women participant list, the founder created a list of past and present volunteers organized by volunteer roles that included table leaders, interpreters, youth group, volunteer coordinators, and transportation positions. The founder further organized the list into four different sections labelled as Board Members, Leadership, Volunteers, and Partners. I created four quota groups that mimicked the founder’s groupings and weighted volunteer roles because of their hands on experience with RAMWI’s programs (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). I successfully recruited thirteen representatives from all these groupings, with at least one in each category (volunteers, board members, and partners). Snowball sampling expanded my recruitment by two volunteers, totaling my volunteer sample frame at ten volunteers.

Some board members and partners played dual roles in the organization and had varying degrees of expertise in refugee resettlement. Due to the small size of the board member sample (n=4), I combined board members in the key informant and volunteer samples to further anonymize their identities. I placed those board members with previous refugee resettlement experience were placed in the key informant sample and those who did not have expertise directly related to refugee resettlement in the volunteer sample.

Table 1. Sampling Strategies and Individuals Interviewed

| Interview Group | Refugee Women | Key Informants | Volunteers |
|------------------------|---|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Individuals | 9 | 3 | 10 |
| Strategy | Convenience sampling based on available contact info on provided participant list | Some board members and the founder | Quota and snowball sampling |

Interviews with Refugee Women

Semi-structured interviews with the refugee women lasted 20 to 45 minutes and occurred remotely via telephone due to Covid-19. With the permission of two participants, I recorded two

interview and took detailed notes. Although I did not receive permission from the women to record the other seven interviews, the extra time needed for translation enabled detailed, close to verbatim notes that were recorded in dedicated notebooks.

All women were given the option of a translator whom I recruited through RAMWI's food drive event and the founder's list of participants. Two of the women opted out of using a translator and interviewed in English. I provided both translators a \$15 Walmart gift card for every interview they translated.

Interview questions with refugee women inquired about general experiences with RAMWI monthly groups and sewing classes. All questions were retrospective in nature because the pandemic prevented RAMWI from convening for the last ten months of 2020. Question topics included access to meetings and classes, reasons for attending RAMWI, difficulties experienced during RAMWI programs, favorite classes, and current needs as well as needs during resettlement (see Appendix A for interview guides).

Interviews with RAMWI Volunteers

Twelve volunteers agreed to semi-structured interviews. All interviews occurred virtually via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or telephone, depending on the volunteer's preference. Conversations lasted from 50 minutes to 90 minutes. With permission, I recorded all volunteer interviews.

Volunteer interviews discussed volunteer experiences and the organization of RAMWI services and programs. Interview questions asked them to describe their reasons for working with RAMWI, communication strategies, planning processes, volunteer role descriptions, services provided during monthly meetings and sewing classes such as transportation and translation, difficulties they faced as a volunteer, suggestions as to what could make their jobs

easier, and adaptation strategies for the diverse needs and backgrounds of the women who access RAMWI services.

Archival Data

Archival data included volunteer handbooks from sewing classes; volunteer applications; program planning spreadsheets; Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs); participant list spreadsheets; the RAMWI Facebook page; the RAMWI website; annual reports; one available annual calendar; RAMWI's constitution; and notes from one presentation on hurricane preparedness. I gathered data virtually or through the help of the founder who lent me hard copies of several documents.

Participant Observation

With the exception of a food drive, the Covid-19 pandemic suspended all in-person RAMWI monthly meetings and transferred the remaining two days of the sewing session to an online platform. After the sewing classes finished their last session in March however, RAMWI did not continue virtual classes. Having started the evaluation after the last class, I could not observe any classes until January 2021, seven months after the start of the evaluation. Despite limited opportunities to participate, I did attend several virtual RAMWI events through the year.

Over the course of the evaluation, I observed and participated in a food drive organized by RAMWI, a virtual volunteer training session held in August 2020, and ongoing virtual volunteer meetings that began in November 2020. In January and February 2021, I attended RAMWI's first virtual monthly meetings with refugee women. With the exception of the food drive, all events occurred online over Zoom or Microsoft Teams due to the ongoing pandemic. None of the online events (volunteer meetings or monthly support groups) directly addressed COVID-related issues, but did frame portions of their time around the pandemic. For instance,

the food safety presentation in February briefly mentioned how easy it is to confuse food poisoning symptoms with COVID symptoms. Despite the challenges of a pandemic and online environment, work over Zoom and Teams centralized important group dynamics between the founder, volunteers, and refugee women.

Data Analysis

I transcribed recorded interviews using the AI transcription software, Otter.ai. However, due to the time-limited nature of the project, I selected only key areas of the transcripts to proofread and edit. To supplement these limited transcriptions, I listened to every audio recording and took memo notes on the computer with a new document for every individual. Memo notes are detailed commentary and field notes on themes and are one of the primary steps in thematic analysis (Bernard and Ryan 2010). Following audio analysis, I coded each individual's memo notes and separated overlapping themes into new documents so that each theme had its own compilation of memo notes and quotes. The same codebook was then used on participants observations and archival data, which I then transferred to the assigned organized document. I coded using a priori codes and an inductive approach that searched for patterns and themes of significance to the participants themselves (Bernard and Ryan 2010; Bernard 2011; See appendix for codebook). To finalize the analysis process, I merged relevant themes together to create macro-level themes that described structural and organizational processes occurring within RAMWI. These macro-level themes serve as the basis of the recommendation section.

Limitations

The Covid-19 pandemic began during the initial stages of this evaluation and brought with it key limitations. First and foremost, the inability to meet in person temporarily shut down RAMWI's monthly meetings and sewing classes for 11 months. I unable to participate in any

face-to-face meetings with refugee women during the entirety of this evaluation, but did attend and help plan the first two virtual meetings RAMWI had in January and February of 2021. Unfortunately, because the current virtual meetings elicit different social interactions and meeting environments, I still had to rely solely on the validity of interview responses from volunteers and refugee women regarding in-person meeting descriptions. In addition, the lack of in-person sessions prevented me from introducing myself to women before phone interviews, making it difficult to build trust in the community.

Cold contacting refugee women introduced another limitation in which I had to rely on a participant contact list given by the founder. Due to gaps in the organization's phone number records, I only received 20 of the 34 women's numbers and only nine of those women responded. Although the founder explained that RAMWI provides specialized services to the Refugees from the Congolese War (RFCW) community, I was unable to interview any individuals who identify as a RFCW. I had success in reaching mostly Arabic-speaking women who attended monthly meetings and sewing classes, verifying the discrepancy in attendance I noticed between RFCW and Arabic-speaking women.

Finally, translation served as an additional potential limitation for some refugee women's interviews. Family members translated for two interviews and tended to paraphrase lengthy answers to yes or no responses. Near the end of my interviews, I gained a community translator widely known through the Arabic speaking community. While the latter translator served as a community liaison for me and could verify my connections with RAMWI, she also was intimately linked to RAMWI as the organization's translator. It is unclear how much of her presence influenced refugee women's answers, especially those pertaining to perceived areas of weakness within the organization. Despite these limitations, this evaluation still serves as a

foundation upon which RAMWI can build future evaluations and as a symbol of RAMWI's dedication to listening to those women it serves.

5. KEY INFORMANT FINDINGS

I interviewed three key informants, one of whom was the founder. Each key informant has over ten years of experience working with refugee resettlement in the Tampa Bay area. They have extensive experience managing refugee programs, researching local issues, implementing service projects, building community connections, and closing community resource gaps. Their interviews informed what they saw as RAMWI's largest challenges and the integration barriers refugee women face upon arrival to the US.

Both the founder and a refugee service provider I spoke with identified social support and mental health resources as two of the greatest needs for refugees in Tampa Bay. In our interview together, the founder discussed that refugee women often share with her that they “struggle to thrive in their new homes.” They expressed to the founder that they did not feel as though they were meeting their own understandings of success and health. The founder further explained that many of the refugee women she works with at her full-time job are afraid to interact with their new communities here in the US. Because the refugee women lack access to proper mental health and emotional resources in general, the founder sees many of the refugee women struggle to manage their own physical health under the umbrella of the US healthcare system. The founder stated that in her position as a refugee services provider she has “yet to see here in the Hillsborough, Tampa Bay area, any mental health program for refugee women, and because of

that mental trauma, and that mental health barrier, they cannot thrive because it's not being addressed. So, there is a lack of emotional growth or healing” (Interview with the founder⁴).

Refugee women often confided to the founder that:

...the evil you know you can confront is better than the good that you don't know. And sometimes it's really true. The women will say I'm bracing myself for violence. I brace myself for torture. I know that. I know how to prepare for it. I know how to prep, mentally block myself when I'm being raped. I know. But then I come to the US and it's that unspoken discrimination. It's that, where nobody cares. That lack of social support. They don't know what to do with that because they've never prepared themselves for that (Interview with the founder).

Refugee women’s mental health depends on the accessibility and availability of social support and services in their communities. While the founder stressed that mental health and social support resources are lacking in Tampa Bay, the refugee service provider I interviewed thought this not to be the case. The refugee service provider explained that there are resources available, but not all refugee women can access them. Refugees in Tampa Bay are not often placed near one another when they first arrive in the US, with families scattered across the bay area (Mahoney et al. 2020). With limited and inaccessible public transportation options however, refugees become geographically isolated and cannot easily form social networks (Mahoney et al. 2020).

However, the US resettlement process begins to fragment refugee families before they arrive in the US. The US only recognizes immediate blood relatives as family units, meaning families that adopt orphan children or culturally define the nuclear family to encompass extended family cannot be accepted for resettlement as a family (Besteman 2014). While the US attempts to resettle refugees in cities in which they already have family, placement is still dependent on a lottery system between refugee resettlement providers (Fadiman 1997). Refugee families find

⁴ All citation references to the founder refer to interviews conducted in 2021.

themselves split between cities with a mother and her underage children in one state and her adult children in another (Fadiman 1997; Besteman 2014). Thus, the social support refugees need becomes predicated on individuals developing relationships with others in their new communities.

The founder shared that refugee women reach out to their American neighbors in an attempt to create relationships, but their neighbors tend to ignore the women and create what the founder called “invisible walls.” According to the founder, these experiences with Americans only added to refugee women’s beliefs that the communities where they are resettled do not want to nor make an effort to know them.

When refugees do not have social support and cannot access community resources in the Tampa Bay Area, they often feel isolated, abandoned, and disenchanted with their new communities (Interview with founder; Interview with refugee service provider). Resettlement orientations abroad and communications from already resettled families fail to inform refugees of the difficulties of living in America, and instead generalize important resettlement information (Interview with the founder). Refugees arrive believing they will receive comprehensive services, housing, education, and economic support for five years. What they are not told is they receive employment support services and *some* welfare (if they continue to qualify) for *up to* five years and that they must become self-sufficient in 90 days (ORR 2012; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). Most arrive unprepared for the deeper issues that refugees face in the United States such as racism and discrimination, technology-assisted medical care (e.g., online patient portals), the private healthcare system, and a culture predicated on individualism (Wachter et al. 2016; Interview with the founder).

RAMWI tries to fill the gap left by the lack of social support and mental health services by providing community connections, dialogue, and a safe space to learn how to resolve unfulfilled needs. This includes social support, cultural education, and help accessing public and other refugee and women's services. Thus, RAMWI strives not only to bring available resources that ease the resettlement transition, but also the "emotional and the human connection" that the resettlement agencies do not have the funding nor time to provide (Interview with the founder).

A Tampa Bay service provider explained that:

All of our [federal and state] refugee services programs are limited to the first five years of a new arrival being in the country. And as we know, you need community and connections much longer than five years in your life, especially if you're starting over in a brand new country. And so RAMWI provides that long term sustained connection. And I think the beauty of it is it brings women together to talk about and address issues that they wouldn't any other place...and that's not going to happen in any setting other than RAMWI because the other programs that serve refugees are around very specific services like employment, or immigration assistance, or learning English.

Implementing social support and education programs for a diverse group of languages and cultures, however, is not an easy task, and one RAMWI grappled with. One key informant shared that during RAMWI's hurricane preparedness and breast cancer classes

I thought that the speakers really weren't in touch with where refugee women were coming from. They were speakers who were just sort of giving a talk like they would give to anybody in the public. And were not...didn't understand well enough that they were dealing with refugees who had a background different from the American public.

The founder is aware of the difficulty in training speakers about refugees so that they can give appropriate presentations to refugees. Understanding how the different class topics resonate with the women and how they understand topics such as schooling in America, hurricane preparedness, or doctors' visits is extremely important in informing how and what future topics should be presented. For example, in noticing that a table of women were laughing during a

hurricane preparedness presentation, a key informant asked the interpreter why the women were laughing.

The interpreter told me women said that when they were running away from the war, they went much more than three days without food and water, and why should they be so worried about a hurricane? Ok? Now, that's not a reality that most Americans think about, but it is a reality for the Congolese. I have no idea how the Syrians perceived that because they had a lot of horrific experiences also. [...] You know, I'm not sure how this information resonates with people who've been through those kinds of experiences. That's not exactly the fault of the presenter. But on the other hand, you probably should know your audience and be prepared to speak to their issues.

Despite the fact that RAMWI strives to create a safe space of mutual understanding for refugee women, this anecdote about hurricane preparedness demonstrates a certain lack of dialogue that often occurs between presenters and refugee women. In failing to reach out to refugee women and listen to what they know of disasters, the presenter overlooked the refugee women's strengths, previous knowledge, and experiences, and spoke instead as though the women were ignorant and in need of information that the refugee women themselves did not necessarily value (or understand why to value). Refugee women comprehend the information presented by RAMWI through their own cultural framework, and speakers need to be prepared to talk to the cross-cultural constructions of topics such as disaster, health, and mental health that refugee women have.

The founder is aware of the disconnect between presenters and the refugee women, and she attempts to intervene and modify presentations to better match what she understands of the refugee women's perspectives and values. But this also requires a delicate balance between her role as organizer and advocate and the expertise of invited volunteer speakers. The founder emphasized to me the need for expert speakers for the selected class topics. But as professionals in their fields, many speakers already have pre-planned presentations that do not target or cater to

refugee women and their backgrounds. Asking volunteers to make their presentations more appropriate for refugees means asking them to put more time and effort into a job in which they already consider themselves to be experts. This disconnect was especially apparent when volunteers or the founder sought out grant-funded organizations with pre-designed education and intervention programming that was intended for the general English-speaking US population but not for refugee women.

While editing the February 2021 presentation on food safety ahead of the month's support group meeting, both the founder and I made note of several cross-cultural issues. For example, the presentation used biomedical terms such as pathogens to describe food illnesses; explained that a meat thermometer was the only way to check if meat was safe to eat; used foods such as guacamole and salsa that were not necessarily well-known to newly arrived refugees; and referenced government agencies in the form of acronyms. The founder passed along our presentation notes to the partner organization one week prior to the presentation date, but the speaker made the final decision to accept only one of our suggested changes. I observed the guest speaker's presentation and made note of several women appearing to disengage themselves from the meeting. After the presentation ended and the guest speaker signed off the Zoom meeting, I asked the attending refugee women about their opinions on the presentation and the usefulness of the information. The women discussed with me that although the information was helpful, it was a topic they already knew a lot about.

Another group of "experts" that RAMWI regularly recruited for volunteer positions included graduate students from public health, anthropology, and other departments at the nearby USF. The founder encouraged USF graduate students to present on topics that were relevant to both their studies and the needs of refugee women. However, student presentations were often

“in development,” and when students gave presentations, the founder found herself torn between being a mentor and ensuring the relevancy of presentations. As she explained:

So we focus on hurricanes. I remember my first session...it was because I usually let students do the presentation. The first presentation they did an amazing presentation. [...] I suggested to them to show a simulation in Tampa Bay called the Phoenix, where what would happen if a category five hit Tampa Bay? And they're like, "oh no, it's fancy. It's gonna be scary." [...] I don't like to micromanage and usually people learn more from their mistakes. So, I didn't say anything, but I came with it prepared on the laptop. So they did the presentation. They talked about everything. Everybody was quiet. I had about 50 women, no 45 women in the room. Nobody was saying anything. [...] I say "hey, ladies. So you've heard all about this. Now, a hurricane is coming, what are you going to do?" And one lady is like, "What is a hurricane?" All this presentation [...] but they didn't know what a hurricane is. The student's like, "What do you mean, what is a hurricane?" But because [students] went from their knowledge base, they knew what a hurricane is.

Similar to guest speakers, student volunteers have difficulty in creating presentations that cater to refugee women's knowledge, experience, and values. Instead, the founder witnessed student volunteers making assumptions about refugee women based on their own personal experiences with disaster and crisis.

When possible, the founder enjoyed being a mentor to many of the students who volunteered and presented with RAMWI. By establishing such a relationship, the founder felt more comfortable intervening when she believed presentations did not resonate with participating refugee women. In general, however, student volunteers said during interviews that they rarely had the specialty needed to give their own presentations to the refugee women. Instead, RAMWI still relies heavily on partner organizations and professional non-profits to speak at their monthly support group.

In addition to presentation relevancy and cross-cultural differences, key informants discussed the challenges and importance of established funding. It became clear during interviews with key informants that RAWMI's lack of formal funding for programming, while

having its obvious drawbacks, also allowed for more flexibility and adaptation to refugee women's needs. At the time of evaluation, RAMWI was still very cautious in applying for grants and largely relied on private donations from individuals. With no formal funding structure, the organization can adapt to the refugee women's needs without seeking approval from a granting organization to tweak or change a prefunded, long-term program. By critically analyzing and selecting only those grants the organization felt matched its goals and values, RAMWI has maintained a sense of autonomy and adherence to its mission statement. This also speaks to an awareness by the founder that there are sources of money and funding out there that can take away your autonomy and ability to meet your mission. As a refugee service provider noted:

I think it's really important when you're a grassroots organization like this, that you're careful to only say yes to, you know, the fiscal opportunities that really fit within your mission and vision. You know, not to just remake yourself for any amount of funding. And [the founder] is really good about looking very carefully and cautiously at commitments and making sure that it's really something that RAMWI can undertake.

Such conservative decision-making has its pros and cons. For now, it has allowed RAMWI to be broad and flexible in its goal to maintain a social support network for refugee women that is not highly bureaucratic and overseen by a funding agency. The founder's cautious decisions to provide a few select services to the refugee women's community have benefited the organization in numerous ways, including refraining from draining its few available resources. With volunteers already carrying several responsibilities and no intact standard operating procedures or infrastructure⁵, RAMWI does not currently have the capacity to take on a strict reporting schedule or deliverable-focused grant. While there are benefits to RAMWI's funding

⁵ See Finding and Challenges section below.

decisions, the flexibility the organization gains by forgoing formality affects the volunteers in some challenging ways, as seen in the following section.

6. FINDINGS AND CHALLENGES FROM REFUGEE WOMEN AND VOLUNTEERS

Among the nine refugee women participated in this evaluation,⁶ the ages of the women ranged from 23 years to 68 years old, with 46.8 being the average age. The women identified as coming from Syria (2), Iraq (4), Eritrea (1), Sudan (1), and Egypt (1). Eight out of the nine women spoke Arabic as their first language and one woman spoke Tigrinya as her first language and Arabic as her second language. The average number of years in the US since resettlement was 5.8 years.

Because the volunteer list I received only had a small number of volunteers, it became clear that RAMWI could easily discern who provided feedback for this evaluation based on demographic information. In order to keep their identities anonymous, volunteer demographic information is broad and general. All ten interviewed volunteers were women and their ages ranged from 20 to 50 years old. While most of the volunteers identified as being American, almost half of the volunteers had personal connections to the immigration and refugee process either via family members or their own experience.

Semi-structured interviews with all nineteen participants (all of whom were women) created the following challenges and recommendations of RAMWI. Because all participant interviews were retrospective in nature, this evaluation describes how participants remember RAMWI and its programs before the organization cancelled its programs for COVID. The participant observation that supplemented interviews describes RAMWI during the pandemic as it transitioned to a temporary online platform. The following challenges and recommendations

⁶ The drawbacks of such a small sample size are detailed in the Limitations section.

thus do not necessarily reflect the organization during pre-pandemic times but can be seen as important reminders for when RAMWI moves forward with its growth plan and transitions to in-person services.

Challenges

This section details those areas of the organization where volunteers and refugee women identified the desire for more help, improved processes, more advanced classes, clarity, and increased structure. Overall, the challenges facing volunteers and refugee women fell into seven overarching themes: 1) informal structure; 2) communication; 3) transportation; 4) funding; 5) inclusion, participation, and social support; 6) empowerment; and 7) class topics. Many of the themes intersect so that challenges related to one theme have noticeable impacts in other themes.

Informal Structure

RAMWI's informal structure has aided the organization in catering to the diversity of religions, cultures, needs, and experiences of refugee women. Through informality, the organization can incorporate ideas from volunteers and refugee women on a rolling basis, allowing them to take ownership over their time with RAMWI as well as the direction of RAMWI and their own education. For example, while the volunteers and founder plan the monthly meetings a year in advance, the lack of protocol or grant-determined performance goals allows the founder to rapidly change any of the planned meetings if an issue suddenly arises in the community.

RAMWI's lack of a hierarchical organizational structure allows the organization to include the volunteers in many aspects of programming. During the annual volunteer planning meeting that is meant to organize the following year's calendar, all volunteers are welcome and all suggestions regarding class topics are considered equally despite educational background or

experience with refugee resettlement. The lack of formal roles also allows RAMWI to continue the practice of “month ownership.” This means that for every month there is a dedicated volunteer leader who will plan and lead the upcoming monthly meeting. This practice distributes planning and organizing responsibilities of each monthly meeting throughout the volunteer workforce so that a single volunteer is not overburdened with extra hours each month. In addition, volunteers expressed that in “owning” a month they could exercise their own creativity and important higher-level skills.

While RAMWI’s informality is an admired strength and permits the organization to easily adapt to needs of the women it serves, the organization’s informality stems from a lack of structure rather than from a purposeful strategic decision. Volunteers felt lost and “flying by the seat of their pants” when attending meetings because there were no clear processes or organizational reporting structure to follow. With the exception of translators, some volunteers expressed that their lack of a formal title provided a lot of ambiguity as to what their roles were during meetings, especially before and after presentations. With no clear direction set before arriving and no standard operating procedures for key operations such as transportation, translation, and incidents, volunteers described their experiences at meetings as “standing around waiting” or feeling confused.

For one volunteer, RAMWI’s informality made it hard for her and her coworkers to gather photo permissions, sign in sheets, and personal information including phone numbers. Attendance was thus, muddled and communication with women outside of meetings relied solely on interpreters and group leaders as having women’s numbers. This led to an incomplete list of contacts for this evaluation as RAMWI did not have direct access to many women’s contact information. In addition, this made it unclear if RAMWI had a formal tracking sheet that easily

laid out when and what topics were taught, which women attended and did not attend, and how long women attended RAMWI programs.

For those volunteers who did have set leadership positions over activities, confusion originated more from the lack of a formal administrative tool that detailed which volunteers were assigned to help them in their sections than the lack of knowledge regarding their role. Because those in defined leadership positions never knew for sure if they had support, they often felt obliged to attend every meeting, leading some to skip family events and not speak out when they needed time off.⁷

Informality also limited the administration of RAMWI. The lack of a permanent place of residence (virtual or physical) due to funding limitations made it hard for volunteers to access shared information and resources for meetings. In particular, this placed a lot of extra burden on the founder who houses all administrative and organizational documents in her own home, leading to a lack of disconnect between her home life and RAMWI. This strong connection, physical and emotional, may be one of the reasons why the founder had a hard time delegating tasks to volunteers and instead performed most tasks on her own. In not delegating tasks though, volunteers missed out on new experiences that could expand their skills sets, opportunities to use already acquired higher level skill sets, and increased communication between volunteers and refugee women.

With the exception of one volunteer, volunteers stated they never received training before arriving for their first meeting, including translators regarding translation procedures. Some recalled the founder informing them to not ask about traumatic events, but they still desired

⁷ This is no way means the founder does not acknowledge these sacrifices or appreciate volunteers. This feeling of obligation is further detailed in the Communication section of Areas of Improvement.

clarity on how to better interact with the women. This included receiving the “Do’s and Don’ts” of social interaction taught in the most recent training in August 2020 earlier in their volunteer career. For some, the training in August 2020 was the first time they received any background on what it means to be a refugee in general and within the United States despite volunteering for several years.

Communication

This section deals with communication between the founder and volunteers as well as between volunteers and refugee women. Refugee women and volunteers both mentioned the founder’s dedication and willingness to listen to the refugee women as an important leadership characteristic they have not witnessed elsewhere. They all recognize that despite being a full-time student, a mother, and full-time employee, the founder still puts in the effort to call and follow-up with both the volunteers and women to ensure their well-being. The founder’s ongoing communication with refugee women regarding their barriers to integration in the US led to the creation of the youth support group, transportation, food and baby goods drives, and increased presentations from female community members such as female police officers during monthly meetings.

Communication issues derived mainly from the lack of clear processes and from the feeling that the founder has a hard time articulating tasks and ideas because she is overwhelmed by too many responsibilities. There is no succinct vision as to what success looks like for a volunteer during meetings and how the volunteer’s personal actions aid refugee women in their resettlement process. Volunteers felt that the organization would benefit from set processes and an intermediary person to “translate vision for the organization, and also break things into

component parts, and flesh out detail to give people a clear understanding of what success looks like” (Volunteer).

In failing to clearly break down tasks for volunteers, the founder often ended up doing most tasks that could be done by volunteers. This often takes the founder away from fulfilling needs or managing issues that arise during events and pushes events to start late or run overtime due to the lack of efficiency. Several years back a group of volunteers did attempt to organize pre-monthly meeting huddles to solve the above communication issues, but the founder was always managing the transportation challenges and refugee family needs that she could never find time to participate. Volunteers also experienced issues in attending pre-meeting huddles as they often played dual roles and arrived late due to transportation responsibilities. In the end, being the least important out of all issues, volunteers abandoned pre-meeting huddles and a possible solution to the lack of clarity.

Seeing the founder overwhelmed and understanding how much effort she puts into being a mother, leader of a volunteer organization, and her full-time job often influenced volunteers to not communicate their needs, issues that arose, or that they were feeling burnt out. Although volunteers realized that the founder was receptive and open to new ideas or needs, many volunteers either tried to find solutions on their own before bringing the founder’s attention to an issue or kept silent.

While not labelled by refugee women as a major challenge, volunteers identified translation as an additional point of contention. Translators for languages other than Arabic were hard to find within the community and meant that RAMWI could not accompany monthly meeting presentations with consistent translation. Volunteers explained that refugee women had diminished experiences when translators were not present as refugee women often had to rely on

handouts, Google Translate, hand gestures, and their limited English to understand presentations. Volunteers reported that they never had an issue in recruiting Arabic translators, but frequently could not find Swahili translators. This is an especially salient point when we remember that all participating refugee women in this project either spoke Arabic as a first language or fluently as a second language. Therefore, discerning how the lack of translation affected refugee women's experiences with RAMWI was not possible.

The failure to involve volunteers in direct community engagement also had an effect on social interactions between refugee women and volunteers during the four monthly meetings I attended (January 2021 – April 2021). Despite some of the volunteers working for several years, refugee women and volunteers did not interact directly with each other. Refugee women who spoke Arabic always signed on and said hello to the Arabic translator as well as the founder, but did not know any of the present volunteers. Swahili speaking women only attended two meetings, but when they did, the women did not appear to know anyone including the founder. USF graduate students who learned Swahili while in the Peace Corps tried to interact with Swahili speaking women, but had a hard time doing so. The founder did not have the numbers for any of the attending women and so could not follow up as to whether Swahili speaking participants had connection difficulties or spoke a different dialect than the one provided.

These social interactions thus make us question who gains social support from attending RAMWI. Refugee women speaking different languages had no direct interactions with each other because they could not communicate in a common language. Volunteers described language groups as naturally separating themselves from others, although one Swahili-speaking volunteer with close connections to the RFCW communities explained that women who identify as RFCW do not like to talk about intimate topics with others outside of their culture. While I

could not verify this statement from any women from the Congolese wars, this may be one reason for decreased attendance by Swahili-speaking women. Additionally, Arabic speaking women had the opportunity to build a sense of community with one another because of the large attendance by Arabic speaking individuals. Community building within RAMWI is significantly harder for those languages and communities with low attendance rates such as RFCW communities.

No volunteer could clearly detail how RAMWI communicated with refugee participants, although it was thought that language groups had group texts via WhatsApp. These groups were led by translators and appeared to be dependent on translators' and the founder's personal networks, which had consequences for transportation access (see below).

Refugee women participants did not speak at length about how RAMWI notified them of meeting dates or organization updates. The women reported that they received text messages from their friends (whom I later verified as Arabic translators at RAMWI) informing them of when, what, and where regarding important information. With the exception of one refugee woman participant, all women were satisfied with translation at sewing classes and monthly support groups. Because all refugee women spoke Arabic fluently, they never experienced a meeting where they did not have available translators. Only one woman said that she could not read the sewing class handouts because they were in English.

Interviews with refugee women also demonstrated minimal communication between volunteers and refugee women. Only one refugee woman participant mentioned English speaking volunteers. All other participants only spoke about their translator friends and the founder. Volunteers agreed that it was difficult to interact with refugee women because of the language barriers between them. Because of the need for translators, there were not many

opportunities for volunteers and refugee women to have a conversation and learn about each other. When they did interact, however, one volunteer noted that elder volunteers tended to speak with a condescending tone to the refugee women.

Transportation

The lack of clear processes and communication affected transportation, with volunteers describing discomfort and frustration when they volunteered for transportation positions. Several volunteers labelled transportation as the hardest or least favorite part of volunteering for RAMWI because of miscommunication between refugees, the founder, translators, and transportation volunteers. Volunteers would often show up to find parents needing car seats or with more people than available seats. Confusion surrounding transportation processes even led a group of volunteers to leave RAMWI. A volunteer explained that:

[the group of volunteers] ultimately said, ‘Sorry, like we’re stepping away from this.’ I think effectively because it’s too frustrating because, because the transportation, you know. We show up and people are there or they’re an hour late. And then by the time we get here, it’s half over. Or, you know, there’s seven people that want a ride and I only have three seats in my car, which we knew to begin with.

Such instances put volunteers in uncomfortable positions where they had to deny women and their families transportation to RAMWI, but could not communicate with the refugee women as to why they could not drive them due to language barriers. Volunteers also could not contact families to let them know they were ready at the pick-up sites or for refugee participants to let RAMWI know that they were not coming and needed to cancel transportation.

More than this however, frustration derived mainly from volunteers’ feelings of uselessness in fixing the organizational issues associated with transportation and it being a consistent identified problem.

I recognize, like, it sounds so simple. But trying to gather the information of who wants to come. Not only wants to come but will in fact, be ready to be picked up. You know, and like, just getting that information and having like, you're going to be at this particular place, not like in your apartment or at your friend's apartment or in the courtyard. Like you're going to be in this particular place so that when my English speaking driver comes to pick you up, they're not knocking on doors, or like asking random people in the courtyard if you want to ride to RAMWI (Volunteer).

Volunteers did not have direct contact with translators. They often had to contact the volunteer coordinator or the founder for questions and then wait to hear back while the volunteer coordinator or founder contacted the translator who then contacted the participant waiting for pickup. This also meant transportation lists fell disorganized as knowledge of who needed transportation went through three tiers of individuals and sometimes multiple translators. Inconsistent and multiple translators caused vague transportation instructions for refugee participants. This, however, could not be verified by refugee participants as all of those within this evaluation received rides from translators and could directly speak with their drivers.

Additionally, transportation was not a role that allowed volunteers to exercise higher level skills, gain experiences in those tasks they found important, or what they imagined volunteering would be like. A volunteer described that,

I wasn't the biggest fan of it, because that's not what I came to do. I was in public health program and I was really trying to figure out how can I best serve in this role? [...] Um, so doing transportation, I did it because they needed assistance to do it. But I, it wasn't. Yeah, it wasn't like my favorite just because I really wanted that public health hands on experience.

RAMWI gains a team of young professional students by recruiting graduate students from the University of South Florida. However, in asking graduate students to routinely help in roles that do not ask for much critical thinking such as transportation, volunteers were unmotivated. They were not using those skills they most valued in themselves.

As briefly mentioned above, understanding how refugee women experienced transportation services at RAMWI was difficult. The refugee women interviewed all either had personal connections to translators and thus, received rides to RAMWI from translators, or had their own cars. Only one woman described using public transportation before she and her family bought a car, but she had no experience with RAMWI-provided transportation. She explained that her discomfort with public transportation was not because the difficulties of using the system, but rather due to people speaking derogatively to her because of her religion.

Funding

Volunteers described funding as a foundational concept that could solve many of the organizational and communication inconsistencies described above. I often heard, “If only the founder had an employee to help her....” Volunteers juggled full-time jobs, school, children, and families in addition to their roles at RAMWI, and while they enjoyed dedicating time to RAMWI they could not take on the organizational and administrative work needed to help RAMWI become more efficient. It became apparent throughout interviews with volunteers about their needs that “RAMWI doesn’t have the capacity or resources to corral the large amount of people and moving parts” (Volunteer). Volunteers’ main goal in suggesting more funds was not to decrease the work they did for RAMWI, but to ease the stress put on the founder from being a leader, treasurer, French translator, and catch-all volunteer. In addition, funding for a part-time employee would open up a central person that volunteers could talk to about their needs without feeling burdensome.

Volunteers also desired funding to pay translators to build a more consistent base of translators from which to pull, to fund a central office, and an official RAMWI vehicle to help

make transportation more consistent and remove the responsibility from volunteers who do not feel comfortable driving participants.

Inclusion, Participation, and Social Support

As briefly seen with transportation responsibilities, volunteers felt there were few opportunities to use their skill sets and talents, challenge themselves, or be creative. Despite doing a lot of work with refugee women outside of RAMWI's structured curricula, the founder did not appear to include volunteers in the extra work. For example, the founder interviews refugee women before they attend their first monthly meeting and follows-up with the women throughout their time with RAMWI. The founder also has goals to increase the organization's social media presence, write grants, deliver donations, write annual reports, and build a bazaar to sell refugee women's handcrafted items. In a few of these areas the founder has extra help, but there are many other responsibilities that volunteers can manage and assist the founder to achieve her goals. Because several of these external tasks included more direct communication with refugee women, excluding volunteers from this work impacted opportunities for refugee women and volunteers to interact.

Without clear, articulated, and analyzed strategies regarding the future of RAMWI, the organization functions on what appears to the outsider as on an impromptu basis that does not use its volunteers nor resources to the best of its abilities. Since individuals other than the founder were not included in tasks outside of monthly meetings and sewing classes, refugee women did not recognize the founder as part of an organization and could not remember that RAMWI was a community organization. Instead, refugee women continuously referred to the founder throughout their interviews and needed reminders as to what RAMWI does. It appears that refugee women do not place trust in the organization, but rather in the founder.. Involving

volunteers in operations outside of monthly meetings and sewing classes such as refugee women interview intake, social media needs, and administration would not only aid in creating an organizational identity, but also ease the founder's responsibilities.

Online monthly meetings also decreased volunteer participation as there were no clear roles for volunteers outside of translators and monthly planner. Despite volunteers participating in volunteer meetings, participant observation revealed that many volunteers did not attend the monthly meetings with refugee women. As a volunteer during these meetings, I often found that I had nothing to do and no focus. It is unclear at this point as to why volunteers do not participate in responsibilities outside of monthly meetings nor why they have not been asked to do so during the online transition. Several conversations with volunteers suggest though, that the founder struggles to translate her big ideas into individual tasks and thus, cannot delegate responsibilities as she does not know herself what she wants. The consequences of this however, are a loss of personal connection between volunteers and the organization due to reduced participation.

In conversations with refugee women, they expressed that they continued to participate in RAMWI programs because they valued the social interaction and connection they gained from meetings and classes. They enjoyed meeting new people, learning about other's cultures, talking to other women, and felt valued. Refugee women sought these connections because they struggled with loneliness, homesickness, and fear during the initial phases of their resettlement experiences due to language barriers, minimal social interactions, and lack of cultural knowledge. One refugee woman described that before attending RAMWI,

I wish somebody called me, told me not to worry, everything is safe, and made themselves available to help. [...] I was sad because I couldn't talk to anybody. People didn't call. I cried when my case manager finally called. I tried calling my case manager, but he didn't call back. I never forget that day when he did.

Volunteers and refugee women alike identified RAWMI's greatest strength as its ability to curb the negative feelings described in the above quote by providing a safe environment through which to express feelings openly and interact with other people. Both refugee women and volunteers felt RAMWI created an open community through their dedication to no religion and no politics, constant encouragement for women to interact with their communities, and the creation of a space for intercultural interaction. In fact, many of the support group participants' favorite class was the cultural day when they all shared food and learned about each other's cultures.

The interviewed refugee women, however, had a difficult time remembering what they learned throughout the year or even what topics RAMWI taught. Beside the world culture day, the only other class refugee women remembered was a safety class with firefighters and police officers, which was described as a very animated session with two-way conversation between the refugee women and safety officers. Volunteers' descriptions of classes provided an environment in which guest speakers "presented to" rather than "presented with" refugee women, making it so very few presentations centralized refugee women's perspectives on topics.

The presentation on food safety is an especially poignant example of the "presentation to" challenge where refugee women told me at the end of class that they already knew all the information presented. The presenter attempted to include women through "knowledge checks," or quizzes, but did not take the time to learn what the refugee women already knew about this topic. Refugee women arrive in the US with a lifetime of experience and knowledge, and so should be addressed as already having a background on all topics presented rather than being seen as blank slates. This is extremely important when thinking about how the process of

empowerment involves addressing individual and community capabilities and assets rather than deficits (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570).

Overlooking capabilities also derives from RAMWI's focus on what refugee women might wish to learn rather than what they already know. End of the year surveys are sent in an attempt to gather refugee women's input about future class topics, but do not reliably receive information about prior classes. Refugee women could not remember the class topics they attended in the past nor what they learned, revealing that while refugee women can detail their needs to RAMWI they cannot reliably provide feedback regarding relevancy and usefulness of presentations after so much time has passed between the annual survey and meetings. And while such surveys do collect refugee women's opinions to a certain extent, refugee women are not included in the annual planning meetings that ultimately determine the direction the organization will take for the upcoming year.

Empowerment within RAMWI

Discerning how RAMWI understood empowerment as a process or the outcome of their empowerment goals was difficult as the organization does not have a consistent mission statement or vision across medias. For example, RAMWI's Facebook description emphasizes self-sufficiency and discusses social support within a business-oriented mindset: "RAMWI will provide a comprehensive approach to business and social issues by creating a profitable enterprise that focuses on client development..." On RAMWI's official website however, social enterprise is secondary to refugee women's engagement with local communities. The organization's focus is again different when looking at printed pamphlets. These kinds of differences demonstrate that RAMWI does not quite understand how it envisions empowerment nor its overall mission.

Despite the lack of clarity regarding the organization's understanding of successful empowerment, the founder often spoke about what that success looked like in the women she helped. The founder has many "success stories" she likes to share that describe RAMWI helping individual women who learned English to gain private donor sponsorship towards earning a higher education degree. In widely sharing these stories, the founder narrows the possibilities of "success" to only those who uphold and follow the American narrative of success.

Empowerment in the US is intimately tied to the American Dream narrative that encourages individualism and participation in the job market, a pervasive narrative that runs deep throughout the R&P program's operations (Ong 2003; Keles 2008; Cannedy 2011; Chen and Hulsbrink 2019). This inadvertently denies "success" to those women who desire to cook and sew for their family, a choice several of the women in this evaluation shared they enjoyed doing rather than selling sewing class creations for extra income. Although the sewing skills class is seen as an opportunity for additional income, discussions with the founder and volunteers did not acknowledge that women in these classes attended sewing classes for other purposes such as home projects.

When empowerment is so narrowly defined in this manner, it imposes hegemonic ideals of empowerment on diverse needs and goals (Klenk 2017). Women who practice and value "gendered behavior in terms of caregiving and domestic duties" are left out of this individualistic notion of empowerment, undermining "those empowerment processes refugee women take within familial dynamics and the social space of the classroom" (Klenk 2017, 171). In operationalizing an outcome, RAMWI must therefore, think about what its definition potentially means for other women who do not fit into the prescribed mold.

Nevertheless, I am also acutely aware of the politics of representation RAMWI must play to gain funding. Only by problematizing recipients of aid and creating solutions that validate donor's worldviews do funders feel organizations are worthy of support (Escobar 1995; Simpson 2004; Abu Lughod 2013; Schuller 2016). Indeed, the organization would not exist if there was not an issue that did not need addressing, but the women made vulnerable in its mission statement initiate varying degrees of consequences for future arriving refugees, including how volunteers interact with refugee women.

This also includes how RAMWI narrates its areas of improvement. Upon discussing the issue of refugee women not remembering classes with the founder and a board member, the founder explained that refugee women's forgetting and loss of memory are side effects from years of trauma. While this may be true, this type of explanation places blame on the refugee women for these challenges and avoids self-reflective thinking from the organization as to what about their programs need improving. There are many good reasons refugee women may forget class topics and information, several of which relate back to teaching techniques and relevancy, but blaming the lives of refugee women prevents the organization from analyzing other possibilities.

Sharing narratives that problematize refugee women's pasts and describe refugee women as vulnerable reproduces power differentials between volunteers and program participants. RAMWI's website describes its mission as bringing "newly arrived refugee, migrant, and other vulnerable women, children, and their families residing in Tampa Bay together" (ramwi.org). While simple, such statements make it appear as if refugee women require others to empower them and lead presenters and volunteers to treat refugee women as blank vessels in need of knowledge. RAMWI can gain much by reversing its mission statement and narratives to instead

centralize those capabilities refugee women bring from their histories and include them more in key meetings regarding RAMWI's future.

Class Topics

Sewing classes were another salient area when discussing class topics with refugee women. All women who attempted to sell their creations described their efforts as unsuccessful due to the fact that they did not know how to begin selling nor knew enough people to sell to. The sewing classes they took offered basic business skills such as how to price material, but did not include how to develop clients nor advertise their creations, two topics described by refugee women as the greatest barriers to selling. One sewing participant even had her son create an Instagram account for her work, but both she and her son did not know how to bring people to her page or use the page to make her work known. In light of this, women asked for more advanced business classes that taught how to best sell their work and attract customers. While RAMWI is currently in the process of creating a boutique for the women to sell their creations, more advanced business classes would allow women to not only gain important employment skills, but also independence and self-sustainability beyond RAMWI.

Additional class requests included intermediate and advanced sewing classes, jewelry making classes, computer classes, basic math skill classes, how to search for financial aid for medical expenses, banking, and how to communicate with and avoid people who make derogatory remarks to them.

The goal of detailing RAMWI's challenges is to highlight how and where RAMWI can focus its resources to make the biggest impact. Out of the seven themes discussed above, the largest and most impactful challenges RAMWI faces are 1) informality; 2) communication; and 3) inclusion, participation, and social support. These three challenges are so intimately linked to

each other and the other discussed themes that focusing effort and resources to these three themes will aid in solving other areas of need.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The suggestions made in this section are the result of feedback from volunteers and refugee women. Each had an active part in creating this section and discussed with me how they would strengthen the organization to better meet their needs. In recognizing that many of RAMWI's areas of improvement also act as strengths, the following recommendations are not meant to change the organization and its goals, but rather enhance its strengths by adjusting administrative and organizational techniques already in use.

Many of these recommendations are not new to RAMWI. In its transition to an online platform, the non-profit faced certain organizational challenges. For instance, integrating monthly meetings to an online platform, accommodating four languages in a Zoom setting, and finding new roles for volunteers when presentations no longer require set-up and clean-up responsibilities. In addition, as a member of the volunteer team during RAMWI's transition I maintained a continuous feedback loop with the founder on volunteer and refugee women's experiences. I recognize that RAMWI is in the process of making changes regarding many of these recommendations and encourage the organization to use this list of recommendations as a resource to refer to when planning its future trajectory.

The recommendations are organized into two main parts: content-related suggestions and organization-related suggestions. Content-related suggestions refer to those ideas that affect classes and refugee women's interactions that occur within that space, such as class topics, presentation structure, and social interactions between volunteers and refugee women. Organization-related ideas focus on the administration, resources, allocation of responsibilities, communication, inclusion, participation, transportation, and structure of RAMWI. Each contains

either a short-term or long-term label to help RAMWI prioritize changes. In marking a recommendation as either short- or long-term, I considered RAMWI’s current resources, number of available volunteers, schedules, the difficulty in implementing the idea, the current pandemic, and the value of the idea to volunteers. For the purposes of this report, short-term indicates a timeframe of under two years and long-term refers to those recommendations of either lower priority or that could take longer than two years to implement.

Content-Related Suggestions

Table 2. Recommendations: Content Related

| Refugee Women’s Participation | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Have equal representation of all holidays celebrated when discussing holidays |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Ask refugee women to be a part of the teaching process by having a group of women present at monthly meetings, or by partnering refugee women with monthly planning volunteers |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | During online monthly meetings, increase cross-cultural learning between refugee women by encouraging women to interact in break out rooms that do not directly pertain to their own culture. |
| Class Structure | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Introduce fotonovelas as handouts rather than written summaries or presentation notes. |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Review presentations beforehand to assess how relevant the information and speaker are to refugees’ experiences. |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Schedule in discussion time during monthly meetings to give refugee women an additional layer of review regarding presented topics. |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Collect refugee feedback on presentations at the end of meetings. |
| Class Topics | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intermediate and advanced sewing classes • Jewelry making classes • Business class that explains how to gain clientele and market items • Cultural sensitivity class for refugee women • Time to practice English • Basic computer skills • How to interact and respond to individuals who make racist or discriminatory comments to the women • Banking • How to search for financial aid for medical expenses |

Increased Refugee Women Participation

I believe that increasing refugee women participation in classes not only allows for more social interaction between women, but also has larger implications for learning. By asking speakers to introduce more active and tactile learning supplemented with the simple technique of participant discussion, RAMWI can not only push women to analyze what they are hearing and seeing, but also to help them learn more about each other. In addition, encouraging women to lead classes or help prepare presentations can increase refugee women's input about what they think is important to learn; give them practice in using resource-finding skills and the English language; and allow volunteers more opportunities to learn more about refugee women in a setting that does not present them as vulnerable women in need of help.

Several volunteers felt that there were individuals who inadvertently approached refugee women in a patronizing manner due to language barriers, education differences, or because they felt sorry for them. Disrupting dichotomies between volunteer and refugee participant can help ease negative interactions and create an interactive environment of respect. In Ager and Strang's (2008) UK report on integration, both refugee and non-refugee participants understood successful integration "in terms of participation of people from different groups in a range of activities" (180). For participation to be achieved however, individuals should actively contribute to interactions and to their surroundings. More importantly, Ager and Strang (2008) found that integration is the combination of participation and cultural knowledge, which includes "non-refugees' knowledge of the circumstances and culture of refugees" (182). Refugees interviewed in the report found that sharing their culture with others made them feel as if they were "contributing something of value" to the local communities in which they resettled (Ager and Strang 2008, 183). The following suggestions thus, lay out ways in which RAMWI can increase

participation from refugee women as well as boost cultural knowledge regarding refugee and volunteer cultures.

1.1 When discussing holidays, have equal representation of all holidays celebrated.

Short-Term. For example, a few volunteers felt uncomfortable about the emphasis on Christmas and Halloween during the fall and winter. They asked that presentations on Christmas be included in a general holiday presentation during which all women share information about their celebrations.

1.2 Ask refugee women to be a part of the teaching process by having a group of women present at monthly meetings, or by partnering refugee women with monthly planning volunteers.

Short-Term. Both options would allow for greater interaction and cultural knowledge sharing between volunteers and refugee women. I acknowledge that partnering volunteers and refugee women would not be feasible all months out of the year, as it depends on two key factors: the availability of translators and English language skill level of refugee participants. However, mixing both suggestions throughout the year would give women who wish to have the opportunity to participate in sharing their knowledge and experience.

1.3 During online monthly meetings, increase cross-cultural learning between refugee women by encouraging women to interact in break out rooms that don't directly pertain to their own culture or language.

Short-Term. For example, February's monthly meeting was a cooking class where women could choose between three different cooking classes (Kenyan, American, or Syrian dishes). Although there were three Arabic translators available during the meeting, all Arabic speaking women chose the Syrian room, which resulted in a missed opportunity for women to learn about other's cultures.

This recommendation cannot occur all the time since translators often play dual roles in virtual settings, but when RAMWI has the available translators and planned enough ahead of time, it should take advantage of the opportunity to create cross-cultural rooms.

Class Structure

These ideas respond to volunteer concerns regarding how grounded presentations are in refugee women's experiences and culture, translation, and how well pre-literate refugee women understand presentation handouts. The organization is aware of the difficulties in presenting general information to a culturally diverse audience and has done well in developing meaningful curricula. The founder edits all presentations to a fifth-grade or lower reading level, so that despite language barriers and reading levels, all refugee women can understand what they see and hear. In addition, the founder reviews all material for cultural sensitivity to ensure that all women can generally relate to the presentations. The suggestions below are simply how RAMWI can improve this process so as to better engage the women present.

2.1 Introduce fotonovelas as handouts rather than written summaries or presentation

notes. *Long-term.* The fotonovela (photonovella or photonovel) is a participant-driven visual narrative that uses captioned photos to disseminate information, entertain, and/or encourage community action (Flora 2007; Given 2008). Because of their popularity within international organizations, it is likely that RAMWI would not have to design its own fotonovelas as many already exist on a large variety of subjects. I recommend taking the time to find and translate when needed fotonovelas for key topics so that women can review the material at home in a manner that is easy and entertaining to digest. While the goal of this suggestion is to reach a wider audience of women with handouts based on literacy level, fotonovelas also have the benefit of being accessible review material for

anyone who needs it. If some women are interested, it would be a good idea to do a project together, during which they create a fotonovela of their own on a topic they find important. Such a project would introduce tactile learning, more in-depth conversations, and be a resource for arriving refugee women in Tampa Bay. See the additional resource section for ideas on fotonovelas.

2.2 Schedule discussion time during monthly meetings to give refugee women an additional layer of review regarding presented topics. *Short-term.* While a critical part of RAMWI is the social support refugee women receive from classes, it is important to emphasize that a central aspect of RAMWI's mission statement is education. Interviews revealed that refugee women had a difficult time recalling what they learned, indicating that presentations need additional teaching techniques to help information resonate better with attendees. An easy way to do this is to shorten presentations and focus only on one main idea, then add discussion time at the end for review. Other ideas volunteers had regarding this challenge was to repeat presentations as necessary and include active, hands-on activities.

2.3 Collect refugee feedback on presentations at the end of meetings. *Short-term.* In addition to having an in-person meeting to discuss future topics, RAMWI currently sends an electronic survey at the end of the year to gauge women's opinions on presentations and their content. Unfortunately, seeing as refugee women could not recall the topics they learned over the year, it is unlikely that the end-of-the-year survey accurately evaluates the relevancy of presentations or speakers. Therefore, after a speaker leaves for the day, the organization should ask participants what they liked about the presentation, how they will use the information in their daily life, and what could be better.

2.4 Review presentations beforehand to assess how relevant the information and

speaker are to refugees' experiences. *Short-term.* In addition to the cultural celebration day, refugee women and volunteers remembered two presentations: women's health and fire safety with the firefighters. All interviewed groups rated these very highly because they taught information the women had been wanting to know and both were interactive.

The fact that refugee women could not remember any of the topics they learned supports a key informant's opinion that the speakers and information did not resonate well enough with the attending refugee women. In light of this, it would be good to review presentations for relevancy related to pre- and post-resettlement experiences as well as diverse cultural understandings of mental health. For many, Western models mental health that focus on trauma and post-traumatic stress do little to explain individual mental health experiences, which instead manifest as physical ailments that in some cultures need traditional healing (Theidon 2013; Nazzal et al. 2014). Ask questions as to how the presented information will come across to an audience that may have priorities that differ from the American public and what this information may mean to a refugee woman post-resettlement. This recommendation is especially important for sensitive topics such as mental health that are accompanied by stigmas in certain cultures (Nazzal et al. 2014; Renner et al. 2020).

Class Topics

Although mentioned above in the Overview of Evaluation section, this section details out all requested class topics by volunteers and refugee women. *Long-Term.*

3.1 Intermediate and advanced sewing classes

3.2 Craft making class including jewelry

3.3 Business class that explains how to gain clientele and market items

3.4 Cultural sensitivity class for refugee women. I attended a talk the founder gave to the community on refugees, what it means to be a refugee, the resettlement experience, and varying cultural behaviors such as how the value of time differs from country to country. A class topic on general American culture and behavior for newly resettling refugee women would help them make sense of community actions and navigate their own communities. “The volunteers are learning boundaries, but refugee women don’t know that they can’t do something when out in the community” (Volunteer 10).

3.5 Time to practice English. English class was the most requested class among refugee women. Most of the interviewed women currently attend English language classes and are instead looking for practice groups. There are various community resources in the Tampa Bay that provide these skills, but scheduling times on days with shorter presentations when volunteers and refugee women can pair up to practice English could be an additional technique to increase socialization.

3.6 Basic Computer Skills. I realize this is not necessarily within the capacity of RAMWI nor class repertoire, but it would be good to include this in the business class above. Several women already discussed attempting social media to sell their items, but did not know how.

3.7 How to interact and respond to individuals who make racist or discriminatory comments to the women

3.8 Banking and how to search for financial aid for medical expenses

Organization-Related Suggestions

Table 3. Recommendations: Organization-Related

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Transportation and Translation | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Organize a meeting with refugee women who receive RAMWI transportation services to discuss transportation challenges |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Decrease time between translations |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Send all presentations to translators before monthly meetings |
| Volunteer Training | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Create and provide a volunteer training curriculum for new volunteers <i>before</i> they attend their first session |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Create a larger bi-annual volunteer training that is more intensive and covers more topics about refugee experiences before and after resettlement |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Ensure there is no condescending tone in new volunteer training sessions |
| Volunteer Responsibilities | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Train dedicated volunteers to absorb the responsibility of interviewing refugee women and follow-up with them |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Recruit volunteers for administrative tasks or ask willing volunteers to claim responsibility for one administrative task |
| Structure | |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Delegate responsibilities and create an order of operations before scheduled monthly meetings |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Reimplement pre-meeting huddles to delegate daily tasks and answer questions |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for important tasks and processes |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Create a Volunteer Code of Conduct and make it visible and accessible during monthly meetings and sewing classes |
| Administration | |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Monitor attendance more closely |
| <i>Short-Term</i> | Maintain an updated contact sheet of participants |
| <i>Long-Term</i> | Find funding for a part-time employee |

Transportation and Translation

1.1 Organize a meeting with refugee women who receive RAMWI transportation

services to discuss transportation challenges. *Long-Term.* Talking with refugee women about what prevents them from arriving at pick-up locations as well as updating RAMWI on schedule changes, needs for car seats, and attendance has the potential to clear up much of the transportation challenges. It is crucial to recognize at this meeting which women receive rides from translators, and thus have direct communication with drivers, and those who do not. From volunteer descriptions regarding transportation frustrations, a

conversation about where and why things get miscommunicated between RAMWI and refugee women would lead to subsequent successful organizational changes.

1.2 Decrease time between translations. *Short-term.* For accurate translations, translators should be translating every few sentences rather than paraphrasing sections of presentations or conversations. Currently during virtual monthly meetings, translators translate after roughly two paragraphs worth of spoken word (approximately 8 sentences). To make it easier on translators and for more accurate translations, this evaluation recommends reducing that time to every two sentences. I realize the translation process during face-to-face meetings is well-structured and this recommendation may not pertain. However, this can act as a reminder to be aware of the time in between translations as one volunteer did ask for extra time to allow refugee women to express themselves.

1.3 Send all presentations to translators before monthly meetings. *Short-term.* Volunteer translators expressed that not all concepts in presentations were easy to translate, especially culturally specific practices such as vision boards. Receiving presentations beforehand would allow translators to process information and think through the best way to translate ideas that are not always linguistically in the same way.

Training Related

Almost all volunteer participants asked for training related to their roles at RAMWI to eliminate feeling “lost” and overwhelmed.

2.1 Create and provide a volunteer training curriculum for new volunteers before they attend their first session. *Long-term.* None of the volunteers interviewed received a training session before they first volunteered with RAMWI. For some, their first training

session was more than year after they began volunteering. I recognize that RAMWI receives volunteers on a regular basis and that providing training sessions similar to the one in August 2020 is not always feasible. However, for all volunteers, there should be a shorter training that reviews key topics such as how to avoid retraumatizing refugee women, how to physically interact with refugee women (e.g. are hugs OK?), and their role during meetings.

2.2 Create a larger bi-annual volunteer training that is more intensive and covers more topics about refugee experiences before and after resettlement. *Long-term.* I envision these two trainings as different from each other. The first would be for new volunteers and structured like the August 2020 seminar, providing a general overview of refugees in the US. The second training would act both as an annual volunteer meeting as well as a training opportunity to learn about important skills such as working with refugee children or how to communicate effectively and respectfully when no interpreter is present. Each year the volunteers would learn about new topics that pertain to volunteering with refugees, the refugee experience, or leadership skills.

2.3 Ensure there is no condescending tone in new volunteer training sessions. *Long-Term.* Much of the first half of the August 2020 training in which volunteers learned about the refugee experience abroad painted refugees in a vulnerable light meant to make onlookers feel sorry for refugees. I recommend caution in sharing videos from UNHCR which market marginality with the goal of gaining donors, and in the process, create a “moral crusade” to rescue the vulnerable Other (Abu Lughod 2013; Schuller 2016). I believe that videos which naturalize socially produced conditions of difference and need (Pigg 1997) reinforce what volunteers described and witnessed as “condescending”

behavior towards refugee women. (See Additional Resource section for resources on marketing marginality.)

Volunteer Responsibilities

This section addresses those challenges related to volunteer participation. I suggest ways to provide volunteers with a chance to learn new skill sets or use those they already possess, increase their interaction with refugee women, and learn more about what RAMWI offers beyond classes. Taking on these responsibilities is even more important now with RAMWI's transition to an online platform as there are not many active volunteer roles during monthly meetings beyond volunteer coordinator, translator, and monthly lead. Delegating responsibilities would renew volunteers' connection with RAMWI.

3.1 Train dedicated volunteers to absorb the responsibility of interviewing refugee

women and follow-up with them. *Long-term.* Beyond interacting with refugee women in classes, this is the most effective way for volunteers and refugee women to learn about each other and connect. Encouraging volunteers to more actively engage with local refugee communities through specified roles outside of monthly support groups opens new opportunities to foster change, mutual respect, and social bridges between cultural communities (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Ager and Strang 2008), thereby strengthening the social process of empowerment for both volunteers and refugee women.

3.1 Recruit volunteers for administrative tasks or ask willing volunteers to claim

responsibility for one administrative task. *Short-term.* I recommend that either the volunteer coordinator or the founder reach out to volunteers and compile their interests beyond monthly meetings and sewing classes. Based on recorded interests and skills, ask

volunteers to manage social media presence, attendance, donation deliveries, check-ins with refugee women, researching potential grants, and reviewing presentations. RAMWI receives many USF graduate students who are looking for experience, and expanding their volunteer responsibilities would allow them to gain important hands-on skills. In order to manage volunteer burn-out, refrain from letting volunteers take responsibility for more than one task.

Structure

Volunteers encountered confusion during monthly meetings because they felt there was not enough structure related to their responsibilities and was cited by volunteers as their biggest stressor. “I’m having to really push through feelings of discomfort and [...] lack of clarity. Right, like in any kind of working environment, not having perfect clarity is such a stressor” (Volunteer). The suggestions in this section give ideas as to how RAMWI can create clear responsibilities and processes to more effectively use volunteers in the field and alleviate frustration.

4.1 Delegate responsibilities and create an order of operations before scheduled

monthly meetings. *Short-term.* Preparing where volunteers will be, what they will be doing, and when they need to complete tasks before meetings will give the founder the freedom to manage issues that arise and overall goals. Volunteer leaders expressed that the lack of organization regarding tasks often left them guessing how many individuals they had in their section to help. Volunteer leaders can better plan for their own areas of responsibility if all volunteers had pre-assigned responsibilities. In addition, interviews revealed leaders felt obligated to miss personal events because they were not sure if anyone would show up to help in their area of responsibility. Improved organization

would allow for such volunteers to plan for their own days off without anxiety and prevent burnout for those who feel required to take on unassigned tasks.

4.2 Reimplement pre-meeting huddles to delegate daily tasks and answer questions.

Short-term. While RAMWI is online, ask volunteers to arrive at least 15 minutes early to run through responsibilities and test technology. This recommendation becomes complicated during in-person meetings because of transportation responsibilities. However, with all volunteers now comfortable with Zoom and RAMWI owning an account, it is possible to meet online for 30 minutes before everyone leaves to pick up participants, or on the day before meetings.

4.3 Create a Volunteer Code of Conduct and make it visible and accessible during

monthly meetings and sewing classes. *Long-term.* Volunteers who attended the most recent volunteer training in August 2020 appreciated the “Dos and Don’ts” section that outlined how volunteers can make clear boundaries between themselves and refugee women. Volunteers interpreted the list as having the potential to help them communicate clearly and maintain a distinction between home life and RAMWI. For Volunteer 2, knowing this list before attending meetings would have helped her better navigate the ambiguous situations she experienced and in which she wanted guidance.

4.4 Create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for important tasks and processes.

Long-term. Volunteers explained they would feel less confused in carrying out tasks if there were clear explanations of them. This is extremely important for tasks such as transportation, where volunteers face a lot of challenges in picking up refugee women and their families. Some areas volunteers asked for more clarity were set-up and what needs to be done before presentations begin; transportation; translation if no translator is

available; and what needs to be done during presentations if a volunteer is not an assigned table leader. The organization created a SOP for those volunteers planning monthly meetings and should use this as a template for other responsibilities. In addition to volunteer tasks, SOPs should be created for incident management. For example, what should a volunteer do if a child falls and hurts him/herself in youth group? How should a volunteer respond if they do not have a car seat during transportation and someone now needs to bring their young child to the meeting?

Administration Related

This final section details suggestions related to funding and administration efforts.

5.1 Monitor attendance closely. *Long-term.* Attendance and photo permission signatures were sticking points for volunteers due to the lack of structure surrounding transportation and meeting set-up. However, monitoring attendance not only increases transparency when reporting to donors and grants, but also allows RAMWI to follow refugee women's progress within the organization. In pairing attendance with presentation topics, RAMWI can plan when topics need to be repeated based on who is new, who no longer needs RAMWI and no longer attends, and who might need a refresher. While RAMWI does not currently have any large grants, consistently tracking attendance will be good practice for grants RAMWI may acquire in the future.

5.2 Maintain an updated contact sheet of participants. *Short-term.* While it is understood that RAMWI has a list of participants and their contacts, I was unable to reach out to many refugee women because there was no organizationally managed contact list of phone numbers. Instead, it appears RAMWI relies heavily on its translators to acquire and manage contact lists rather. In doing so, the organization runs the risk of leaving

particular refugee women out since phone contact depends on the translator's personal connections rather than a third-party organized list. In addition, the lack of an updated list puts pressure on translators to come to every meeting as RAMWI would not be able to communicate with refugee women regarding transportation or other pre-meeting administrative work if another translator had to step in. Maintaining updated contact lists would also prevent instances similar to what I experienced when refugee women could not be contacted when needed.

5.3 Find funding for a part-time employee. *Long-term.* I understand the founder's hesitancy to apply for or accept grants, recognizing that many come with added administrative responsibilities and limitations. However, the organization struggles to maintain an organized structure because the founder is having to balance several full-time responsibilities. RAMWI and the founder could achieve so much more if the organization had an individual to relieve the founder of reports and administrative responsibilities. This would open the founder up to focusing more on leadership, strategic vision, and building community partnerships and a stronger donor base. More importantly, a secure part-time position would allow the Board to plan strategically for the future of RAMWI, a task board members regretfully set aside because of the organization's reliance on an unfixed pool of volunteers.

Additionally, an official employee would aid RAMWI in securing a more self-sustaining future. I believe that in its current functional capacity RAMWI would be unable to operate in an organized manner if the founder needed to take time off. Her responsibilities are so deeply intertwined on all organizational levels that for some refugee women she is the only individual in the organization they know. In order for

RAMWI to grow, it needs an identity and history of its own in the community that allows for multiple leadership and administrative positions.

5.4 Define empowerment, the empowerment process, and outcome. Implement these newly defined concepts throughout RAMWI's programs and into the organization's mission statement. *Long Term.* In order to clearly define how the organization and refugee women understand empowerment, RAMWI must clarify their mission, values, and goals. This is a particularly difficult task because in defining a word, individuals and groups create boundaries, clarifications of who belongs and who does not belong. It is important that RAMWI cautiously approach defining empowerment outcomes and be critical of the methodology it uses to define what success looks like. Who sits at the table to collaborate with RAMWI determines who deserves to receive empowerment services and sets the goals for other women who may disagree with the decided upon definition of success.

Defining the outcome of empowerment involves creating a generalized approach that can be individualized to the values and experiences of each woman RAMWI serves, and cannot be designed without active input from refugee women. The balancing game RAMWI may come to face in the future between funding and the diversity of refugee women's values, needs, and cultures only further confirms the importance of RAMWI writing out a clear mission, organizational understanding of empowerment, and plan for growth.

5.5 Consolidate all mission statements, values, and goals across social media and make clear exactly what services RAMWI provides. While RAMWI has a current mission statement on its website, this statement differed between the websites, social media

venues, and printed material that I reviewed. It was also difficult to determine if RAMWI provided programming outside of monthly meetings and sewing classes as interviews with the founder described several different activities not listed on its website or known to volunteers such as intake interviews, donations, and private classes for community groups regarding sensitive topics. The balancing game RAMWI may come to face in the future between funding and the diversity of refugee women's values, needs, and cultures only further confirms the importance of RAMWI writing out a clear mission, organizational understanding of empowerment, and plan for growth.

8. CONCLUSION

I used an applied anthropology approach for this evaluation that put to use refugee women's and volunteers' lived experiences within the context of US resettlement and RAMWI. Applied anthropology goes beyond the "traditional" quantitative evaluation to analyze the people and their interactions that are behind the numbers (Crain and Tashima 2005). The applied anthropology perspective draws out the nuances of behavior, recognizes power and its impacts, and reads between the lines of what is being said or silenced. In short, applied anthropology is designed to analyze what other evaluations miss—the social connections between individuals and between individuals and structures.

Who evaluators speak to, the questions they ask, and the context in which they engage others greatly affects the qualitative analysis that follows. Interpreting behavior within its spatial and cultural context provides the participants the opportunity to share their perspective through their own activities (Crain and Tashima 2005). Behavior, context, social connections, and individuals' interactions with structure become extremely important to recognize and analyze when working to assess the accessibility and relevancy of a program.

As a volunteer participant throughout the evaluation experience, I shared my ongoing interpretations and recommendations to RAMWI's leadership and its volunteer groups. Using this communal and iterative process allowed RAMWI staff to identify barriers associated with implementing new ideas and to brainstorm solutions to these barriers. Not only did this communal process promote volunteer and leadership input concerning this evaluation, but it also

encouraged RAMWI to take immediate steps toward overcoming the newly discovered challenges.

The recommendations in this report are foundational changes that can aid RAMWI in formulating a more structured and definitive organizational identity, but they are not the final step. My suggestions are meant to give RAMWI a baseline from which to formulate a clear strategic picture of the organization's long-term future and individuals' responsibilities within that vision. The Covid-19 pandemic created many new barriers for the organization, but it also pushed the organization to realize important improvements it needed to undertake before it transitioned to a temporary online platform.

As a completely virtual evaluation, I had to adapt alongside the refugee women to a new online space that masked the context the women existed in beyond the screen. Instead, as a group, the monthly support group existed in an open virtual space that prohibited me from following the program through the lived experience of others (Crain and Tashima 2005). Although a limitation of this project, the online space provided an interesting context with which to interpret communication between individuals. Without in-depth behavioral and spatial analysis, words and their interpretations became central to the interactions between individuals during monthly support groups and volunteer meetings.

While research details refugee women's resettlement barriers (Uehling 1992; Mohamed 1999; Deacon and Sullivan 2009; Hatoss and Huijser. 2010; Koyama 2014; Haffejee and East 2016; Parajuli et al. 2019; and Qutranji et al. 2020), few studies examine how refugee women interact with the non-profit organizations that have emerged to supplement resettlement programs (Klenk 2017). In evaluating RAMWI, I took the first step towards analyzing refugee women's engagement with local non-profit organizations and the people within them. As an

empowerment-focused organization that acts tangentially to resettlement service providers, RAMWI has made strides in supplementing resettlement providers by providing refugee women in Tampa Bay a safe space to ask questions and discuss the experience of navigating a new culture on their own.

RAMWI still struggles, however, with inclusion, participation, and structural challenges. The organization's heavy focus on educating refugee women prevents RAMWI from promoting open dialogue between host communities and refugee women. My hope is that through my recommendations RAMWI can transform into an organization that centralizes the capabilities, talents, and experiences of refugee women rather than their potential deficits.

The four steps RAMWI can make the greatest impact in response to this evaluation are to 1) increase refugee women's participation during monthly meetings, 2) create clear volunteer role descriptions, 3) involve volunteers in responsibilities outside of monthly meetings, and 4) research funding opportunities to hire a dedicated part-time administrator. RAMWI understands its resources and capabilities better than me and should not interpret these suggestions as definitive. As written, they are not ratings that reflect organizational gaps, but rather reminders of RAMWI's progress and conversation points for future planning. More than anything, the most indicative finding of organizational success from this evaluation was the positivity that refugee women felt after attending classes and the connection RAMWI provided to the broader community through education and conversation.

Volunteers' experiences revealed that as the organization makes plans to grow, it should consider the important role volunteers could play as liaisons to the American community. RAMWI's focus on the refugee woman as the core participant of its programs causes the organization to overlook its influence on volunteers and interactions between volunteers and

refugee women. Volunteers are the central link between refugee women and their local communities and thus, part of the foundational social connections that provide the connective tissue between refugee women, community resources, and feelings of belonging (Ager and Strang 2008). Because of this important relationship between volunteers and refugee women, it is important to envision volunteers as active participants and beneficiaries of empowerment processes.

The road that lies ahead for RAMWI is one of increased community engagement and strategic meetings to determine how RAMWI wants to interact with and impact the refugee community. Assessing RAMWI's impact involves uncovering what new avenues its classes and community open for refugee women. It requires that RAMWI put aside its own ideas of success, concerns, assumptions, and culture aside (Crain and Tashima 2005) to discover the unique manner in which refugee women use the information given and what they wish to use it for in the future.

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10. APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDES

Refugee Women Interview Guide

I just want to remind you don't have to answer all the questions. If you do not wish to answer a question, please let me know. It will not be held against you by RAMWI or by me. You may also stop the interview at any point in time if you don't feel comfortable. This will also not be held against you. Your participation is completely optional.

To start, I'm just going to ask some basic questions about you and your family.

Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. Can you please tell me where you are from?
3. What languages do you speak?
4. When did you come to the US?

RAMWI Questions

1. How often do use RAMWI's services?
2. What do you go to RAMWI for? Why?
3. When did you first start going to RAMWI?
4. Why did you first start going to RAMWI?
 - a. Do you still go for this?
5. If they don't use all services, ask why not.
6. How has RAMWI helped you?
 - a. If they detail what classes/events they attend, ask specifically about these individually.
7. How do you get to RAMWI?
 - a. Bus? Carpool? Drive? Walk?
8. What stops you from going to RAMWI more?
 - a. OR what allows you to go to RAMWI so often?
9. How does RAMWI translate the information for you?
 - a. How does RAMWI communicate with you?
 - b. Do you understand everything when you to go RAMWI?
10. How do you hear about changes to dates or new events/programs/classes at RAMWI?
 - a. If you wanted to get information about a class, program, or event at RAMWI who would you go to in order to ask questions?
11. What was the hardest part about coming to the US?
 - a. When you first arrived here in the US, what did you need the most help with?
12. What is your favorite part about RAMWI?
13. What topics would you like to learn more about?
 - a. Why would you like to learn about these topics? [Ask about each class topic individually]
14. What does RAMWI do well?

15. Is there anything you would change about RAMWI?

Board Member/Volunteer Interview Guide

I just want to remind you don't have to answer all the questions. If you do not wish to answer a question, please let me know. It will not be held against you by RAMWI or by me. You may also stop the interview at any point in time if you don't feel comfortable. This will also not be held against you. Your participation is completely optional.

1. What is your position with RAMWI?
2. How do you help RAMWI in this position?
3. How long have you been helping RAMWI?
4. What influenced you to volunteer for RAMWI?
5. Can you please walk me through the process of becoming a volunteer?
 - Probe:** Can you describe the interview?
 - Probe:** Can you describe the volunteer training?
 - a. Was the volunteer training relevant to you? Do you use the information they taught you? What's the most important thing you remember from the training?
6. Which programs do you volunteer for?
 - a. What is the purpose of these programs/classes?
 - b. How have they helped the refugee women who have attended?
7. How often do you volunteer with RAMIW?
 - a. How do you feel about this schedule?
 - Probe:** Is this schedule a good fit for you?
8. How do you feel RAMWI is using your skills and talents?
9. Is there anything you wish you could do at RAMWI, but haven't had the chance?
10. In your own words, can you tell me what RAMWI does?
 - a. What is its central goal?
11. Who do you go to when you have questions about the day's activities?
 - a. Your schedule?
12. How do you communicate activities and information to the participants?
 - a. What alternatives do you have in place if a translator isn't available or has an emergency and cancels?
 - b. How do communicate event handouts to women who are preliterate?
13. How is information communicated to you by RAMWI during a days' events?
 - a. Before an event?
 - b. On a day-to-day basis?
14. What is your favorite part about RAMWI?
15. What does RAMWI do well?
16. Is there anything that RAMWI could improve?
 - a. Why does it need improvement?
 - b. How would you suggest they improve it?
17. Do you feel you can share your ideas of improvement with RAMWI?

For Board Members Only:

1. What is your role on the board?

2. Why did you agree to be on RAMWI's board?
3. What are the board's responsibilities?
4. What do you see as the goals of the board?
5. How did you choose the mission statement for RAMWI?
6. What is the most important aspect of the mission statement? *Read it for them if necessary.*
 - a. Why this particular part?
7. How often does the board meet?
8. How do you decide the agenda for each board meeting?
9. How do you as a team strategize for the next fiscal year?
10. How do you communicate these strategies to your interns and volunteers?
 - a. To refugees?
11. How do you decide what to prioritize for the year?
12. How do you choose what to improve and what's been going well?
13. Where do you get your funding from?
14. How do you choose where to apply for funding from?
15. Who is invited to attend board meetings?

For both Board Members and Volunteers: Definitions

Mission Statement:

“Our mission is to bring newly arrived refugee, migrant and other **vulnerable** women, children and their families residing in Tampa Bay together. Doing so, we hope to **empower**, engage and support them during the difficult phases of resettlement and transition.”

AND

“Is to enhance the lives of refugee and migrant women in the community by providing an opportunity to **health**, engage with others while learning the skills necessary to become **self-sustainable**.”

For Board Members ONLY:

1. Why do you believe these words are central pieces of your mission statement?
2. Why do you see self-sustainability, health, and empowerment as the best way to help refugee and migrant women?

[Ask only if time allows] Definitions:

Self-Sustainability

1. What does self-sustainability mean to you?
 - a. What does self-sustainability look like in individuals? Families?
2. How does one become self-sustainable?
 - a. What helps a person/family being self-sustainable?
3. Whose responsibility is it to make the family/individual self-sustainable? (which family member(s))
4. What does responsibility mean?
5. What are the responsibilities of each family member?
6. Does RAMWI help women and their families become self-sufficient?
 - a. If yes, how so?

Health

1. What does health mean?

2. What does good health look like?
Probe: What does a healthy woman look like? Act like?
3. What helps people have good health?
4. Does RAMWI help women have good or better health?
 - a. If yes, how so?
 - b. If no, how could they help?

Empowerment

1. What does empowerment mean?
2. What contributes to empowerment?
3. How does a woman become empowered?
4. What does an empowered woman look like?
5. What kinds of resources does an empowered woman have access to?
6. Does RAMWI help women feel/become empowered?
 - a. If yes, how so?
 - b. If no, how could they help?
7. What would make you feel empowered?

Vulnerability

1. What does vulnerability mean?
2. What contributes to vulnerability?
3. What does vulnerability look like?
Probe: What does a vulnerable woman look like? Why?
4. How does a woman become vulnerable?
5. What would make you personally feel vulnerable?

The Founder Interview Guide

1. To start off, can you please tell me a little about yourself?
2. Why did you start RAMWI?
3. Can you please tell me in your own words what RAMWI does?
 Prompt: What's the main purpose of RAMWI?
4. Self-sustainability, empowerment, and vulnerability are key words in your mission statement.
 Why did you choose to focus on these?
 - a. How do you include these concepts in the monthly meetings and sewing classes?
5. When you were building creating the monthly programs, was there any particular group you had in mind?
 - a. How about the sewing classes?
 - b. Are those groups present at the meetings and classes?
6. I recall that you mentioned you didn't intend for RAMWI to be an organization for women who have been here in the US for a long period of time. Can you maybe describe a little more the demographic of women you mainly try to reach?
 - a. How long do women usually stay with RAMWI?
7. How is RAMWI different from your original idea for an organization?
 - a. Why were these changes made?
8. You are catering to a very large audience with a very wide educational and language background. How do you make sure that the information speakers provide is relevant?

Prompt: For example, there is a lot of information within just the topic of hurricane preparedness. How do you make sure what the speakers decide to talk about is relevant to the women?

9. In your perspective, what are refugee women's biggest needs when they first resettle?
 - a. How about one year from when they first arrive?
10. How do you target these needs?
 - a. How is RAMWI addressing the fact that women who work can't necessarily attend these meetings?
11. [RAMWI's Volunteer Coordinator] detailed the evaluation process RAMWI has at the end of the year, which is amazing. Not enough organizations reach out as actively as RAMWI does to its participants. How do you ensure that you're reaching all the women?
12. Did you ever have a class or event that didn't go as planned? How did you address the issues that arose?
13. How does RAMWI differ from other migrant and refugee women's organizations?
14. What gaps does RAMWI fill within the resettlement industry?
15. What are your personal biggest needs right now in relation to RAMWI?
16. What do you think is the strongest aspect of RAMWI?
17. What do you think could strengthen RAMWI?

Prompt: What are RAMWI's biggest needs?