

## A Review of Refugee and Gender Theories for an Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice with Refugee Women and Girls in Malaysia

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### Abstract

This journal article looks at the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls through the lens of social theories. The article presents three different theories: refugee theory, gender theory and social work theory. Refugee theory looks at the flight and settlement patterns of refugees and distinguishes between anticipatory refugees, who leave the region before the crisis escalates, and acute refugees, who flee after the situation has deteriorated. It also classifies refugees into three groups based on their attitudes towards their home country: majority-identified, event-alienated or self-alienated. The article then briefly outlines the four key areas of refugee integration in their host countries: Marks and Means, Social Connections, Facilitators and Foundations. The importance of integration and the institutional environment to the settlement and adjustment process is also highlighted. In addition, the article explores the application of gender theory to understand the experiences of refugee women and girls and the discrimination they face. In conclusion, the article highlights the importance for social workers to understand and apply these theories to improve the wellbeing of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls.

**Keywords:** Refugees and Asylum-Seekers, Women, Theories, Gender, Social Work

### Introduction

Refugees are people who leave their country out of justified fear. In their attempt to flee their country, they lose their family, property, and possessions. Their perilous journey to a foreign country presents them with numerous obstacles and is can be far more dangerous than remaining in their home country. Their suffering does not end there. When they enter a new country, they are confronted with a new set of obstacles. When they reach the coast or border of a new country and realise that they may not be able to live a better life, their hope for a better life often fades. These people may not have immediate access to essentials such as

food, water, sanitation, shelter and medical care (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2012). The physically and emotionally distressing experiences associated with their forced migration and limited or no access to health services in the host country further deteriorate their health and may have a negative impact on the host population as well.

To understand the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers who are forcibly displaced, theories can play a crucial role. They provide a framework and explanation for the experiences, challenges and possible solutions for these populations. By using theories to analyse and understand these experiences, strategies and interventions can be formulated to improve the lives of these refugees and asylum seekers. According to Popper (1959, p. 69), theories are “nets cast to catch what we call ‘the world’: to rationalize, to explain and to master it as cited in (Blaikie, 2000). Social theory is a branch of social science that describes recurring patterns or regularities in social life (Blaikie, 2000). It answers researchers' questions about why people behave in a certain way or why a social phenomenon occurs. By using theories in the study of refugees and asylum seekers, including their experiences, social work researchers and practitioners can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to their experiences, both favorable and and unfavorable.

Theories are also incredibly important for social workers as they provide a framework for understanding human behaviour and their experiences as individuals, groups or communities. Through the use of social theories, social workers are able to identify and further explore the root causes of the challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. They are also able to predict the consequences of any interventions aimed at improving the lives of these populations, or even the lack thereof. In this article, we present two different theories that can be used to understand the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls. We additionally present a third theory suitable for application in social work practice with refugees and asylum seeking women and girls.

### **Understanding refugee flight and settlement using refugee theories and frameworks**

Refugees who are either temporarily settled in a host country or are accepted for resettlement in a new country differ in their attitude towards their displacement as well as their sense of identification with their new environment and the people around. Kunz (1973) through a study on refugees, proposed the ‘Kinetic Models of Refugee Movements’ to explain their flight and settlement patterns. The author likened their movement to that of a billiard ball, “devoid of inner direction their path is governed by the kinetic factors” (Kunz, 1973, p. 131). Their flight and settlement patterns are said to conform to either one of the two kinetics types, known as anticipatory refugee movement and acute refugee movement. Anticipatory refugees leave their home country prepared before the crisis situation deteriorates and prevents their departure. They usually arrive in a new country with some knowledge and resources that may provide them with livelihood options. Acute refugees, on the other hand, flee after the situation in their country deteriorates. They arrive in a new country usually unprepared and their primary purpose is for safety (Kunz, 1973). However, little thought is given by acute refugees to the consequences of their flight due to short time span placing them in a state of shock once they reach the place of asylum (Stein, 1981). They will then begin to think of the three classic choices, “to return home, to remain in the place of the first asylum or to accept a distant resettlement opportunity in a strange land” (Stein, 1981, p. 322). In the case of the Rohingyas, apart from those who flee Myanmar during the crises, many can

be anticipatory refugees as they travel to Malaysia to reunite with their family, relatives or friends and start their lives in this majority Muslim country. Those who do not know anyone in Malaysia, or those who are unable to reach their acquaintances in Malaysia (when they are held in the temporary holding sites in the Malaysia-Thailand border) to be released after payment. They are also offered loans for which they have to pay back an exorbitant sum (Wahab, 2018). Kunz in 1981 further expanded the refugee theory and analyzed areas prior to and following their flight that affects the outcomes of their settlement. It was stated that refugees fall into three categories in their social relationship to the population of their home country which they leave behind. The first categories of refugees are called majority-identified refugees. These refugees believe that their opposition to the events that caused their flight is shared by the majority of their fellow countrymen (Kunz, 1981).

Although they do not align themselves with the government, they are passionate about the nation. The second category of refugees is event-alienated refugees. This category of refugees is uncertain of and resentful towards their countrymen due to either event preceded their flight or of any past discrimination (Kunz, 1981). The third category, self-alienated refugees are exiles who for various individual reasons and beliefs do not wish to identify themselves with the nation although they may have some attachment towards the physical aspects of their country (Kunz, 1981). The Rohingyas in Malaysia are being forced out of their country due to discrimination and violence against members of their community. They are majority-identified in the sense that the conflicts that have caused them to flee their homes affect members of their community, which they collectively resent.

Although refugees arrive in a new country with mixed feelings, they generally have high expectations of their new life (van Heelsum, 2017). However, in order for them to adapt well in their new settlement, the nature of the country and its inhabitants play an important role alongside the refugees' expectations. According to (Kunz, 1981), a number of host-related factors that affect refugee settlement are cultural compatibility, population policies and social attitudes. The author explained that cultural compatibility is an important factor that enables refugees to come to terms with people in the new country. The inability to bridge the cultural gap between refugees and their new community can lead to inhibitions and withdrawal from human contact. However, if the refugees find a sufficient number of people who speak their language and share their values, traditions, way of life, religion, political views and food habits, and are also able to understand the people of the host country, they will integrate well and identify better with that country (Kunz, 1981). Rohingyas tend to choose migration to Malaysia and Bangladesh, primarily due to religious reasons. Malaysia's official religion is Islam, and since the Rohingyas were persecuted in their home country for various reasons, especially religious, they find a sense of belonging and security in Malaysia. They can practise their faith freely, have access to mosques, halal food and other necessities. The population policy of the host country also plays a crucial role in the settlement of refugees.

Refugees hosted in underpopulated countries, some of which actively promote population growth through immigration and support the influx of migrants and refugees, are more likely to settle successfully. These countries often have labour shortages and underdevelopment that provide many opportunities for refugees. However, these societies tend to view refugees primarily as a labour force and value only the healthy and young. In contrast, overpopulated or self-sufficient countries are less inclined to accept large numbers of refugees. These

countries are generally more tolerant and do not force refugees to adopt their way of life, as Kunz noted. Take Malaysia, for example, where the labour market relies heavily on foreign labour, especially for low-skilled jobs that the local population is less inclined to do. The Rohingya population plays an important role in filling this labour gap and contributing to the informal economy. The third host-related factor influencing refugee settlement is social receptivity. Societies welcome newcomers with the expectation that they will conform to the host culture. The extent of expected conformity depends on the type of society. Monistic societies are less receptive to newcomers who adhere to their other culture than pluralistic societies (Kunz, 1981).

The integration process is central to the settlement of refugees and their adaptation to the host society (Strang & Ager, 2010). Therefore, the integration process is not only influenced by the refugees' personal skills, but also by the institutional environment of the society in which they have settled (Valtonen, 2002). For an effective integration process of refugees within a society, it is important to understand how these refugees integrate or are integrated into a particular society in which they have settled. Ager & Strang (2008) have outlined the main areas of integration in a framework. The framework includes four areas of integration, namely markers and means, social connections, facilitators and foundations. Markers and means of refugee integration are employment, housing, education and health. The Social Connections domain, adopted from Putnam's (2002) concept of social capital, consists of social bridges, social bonds and social links. Social bond refers to "trusting and co-operative relations between members of a network who see themselves as being similar in terms of their shared social identity" (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, p. 654). In the case of refugees, it refers to the bond within a refugee community. This is in contrast to the concept of social bridge, which refers to "relations of respect and mutuality between people who know that they are not alike in some socio-demographic" aspects" (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, p. 655), and refers to refugees' relationships with other communities. The literature on social capital has been expanded to include the concept of social connections, defined as "norms of respect and networks of trusting relationships between people who are interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power or authority gradients in society" (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004, p. 655). The Facilitators' domain of the framework covers language and cultural skills that refugees need to learn in order to be accepted by community members of their new settlement. Safety and stability are also found in the domain of Facilitator. Feeling safe, which is provided by stability, is important for refugees to integrate well into the community. The last domain, Foundation for integration is built upon rights and citizenship.

### **Gender theory and its use in understanding the experiences of women refugees**

Gender theory provides an important understanding of norms, including but not limited to expectations of roles and responsibilities and the relationships between women and men within a society. Connell's (1987) theory can be used to understand the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls. Connell identified critical components of existing theories of sexual inequality, gender and power imbalances and developed an integrative theory of gender and power (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). According to Connell (1987), the division of labour, the structure of power and the structure of cathexis are the three main elements underlying patterns of power relations between women and men and definitions of femininity and masculinity. Although the author agrees that these structural models are not the only identifiable structures that exhaust the field, empirically they are the most important structures of gender relations. These three structures differ in their ordering

of social relations, but are not independent of each other. They exist at the social and institutional levels (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). The three structures are embedded in society in the form of abstract, historical and socio-political forces that control power and social norms based on gender roles (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). The structures are also present at the institutional level, which is not limited to the household, the community and the state. Their existence within social institutions is maintained by social mechanisms that are also shaped by gender roles and practises.

The sexual division of labour refers to the “allocation of particular types of work to particular categories of people” (Connell, 1987, p. 99). The allocation of work according to the sex of the person typically benefits the men and the expense of women. Connell (1987) illustrates inequalities documented by Ruth Cavendish in the ethnography of a British motor vehicle component assembly plant which shows a distinct gender division of labour, that in order to be in a better position, one has to be a man. At the societal level, the division of labour segregates the roles and responsibilities and limits women to “women’s work” (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). The segregation constrains women not only in terms of job opportunities but also their level of income. At the institutional level, the division of labour places “unpaid nurturing work” such as providing care for children, elderly and the sick on women’s shoulder (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Due to heavy workload and lower-income generating responsibilities, women tend to rely on men financially. Although women do participate in income-earning activities, they are generally found in a lower position and receive lower income as compared to the men. The sexual division of labor is also the basis of differential skilling and training of women and men (Connell, 1987) which further perpetuates gender inequality. In the case of refugee women, they face additional challenges in the form of care work and lack of or opportunities for income-generating activities. Refugee women often face these obstacles, including in accessing formal employment due to factors such as language barriers, lack of relevant skills and work experience (Nazri et al., 2022; Rajaratnam & Azman, 2022). This is particularly challenging in times of crisis such as war and human conflict, as male mortality rates tend to be higher than female mortality rates (Affleck et al., 2018) leaving women and other family members to support themselves.

The sexual division of power is another structural model proposed by Connell (1987) in which the author presses for the importance of observing an individual or even collective act of force or oppression by looking into the structure of power. Rape and other sexual violence experienced by Rohingya women in the jungle camps bordering Malaysia-Thailand (Mezzofiore, 2015), for example was presented by the media as a violent act by kidnappers. Connell’s theory looks at it beyond violence by a small group of men against women refugees. The author views the violence as being informed by power inequalities and ideologies of male supremacy. Here, power is viewed as a balance of advantage or inequality of resources in institutions. Abuse of authority and control in relationships are social mechanisms that maintain these balance of advantages or inequalities between the sexes (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Women refugees who experience rape and sexual violence were vulnerable due to their dependence on the smugglers for their own and their family member’s food and safety. Not only are they vulnerable to sexual violence, but to other challenges too. Connell also contended that the structure of power is an object of practice and of condition where the patriarchy portrays to have an orderly structure. This order is imposed through various means, one large part of this effort is through culture (Connell, 1987). Cultural



limitations imposed upon women extend beyond constraints on their mobility, ability to pursue employment, and access to education, legal rights, welfare, and healthcare provisions are forms of order imposed upon women. However, power is not constantly held by men in all aspects of social life. There are also circumstances when women have more power and authority. According to Connell, “there is a core in the power structure of gender, contrasted with the more diffuse or contested patterns of power in the periphery” (Connell, 1987, p. 109). The author states that the power of men and the authority of masculinity are concentrated at the core while at the periphery, their power is rather negotiated. Example of an institution that can be considered to be part of the periphery is the family because men’s authority within this institution is negotiated, especially in a less conservative households.

Connell views the structure that organizes one person’s emotional, to be specific, sexual attachment to another as ‘the structure of cathexis’ 1987. At the societal level, this structure shapes our perception of ourselves and limits our experiences of reality through regulating society’s view about women’s sexuality (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Women’s sexuality in this sense is attached to social concerns such as “impurity” and “immorality” (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000) while the same is not done for the men. Baumeister & Twenge (2002) calls it “the double standard of sexual morality” where certain sexual activities by women are condemned but not if the same activities are done by men. At the institutional level, the structure of cathexis is maintained by social mechanisms such as preconceptions of people on ways that women and men should express their sexuality (Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Women’s sexuality is controlled and suppressed through stereotypical beliefs that women who engage in premarital sex are considered ‘damaged’. This is a form of objectification of the female body leads to a range of mental health risks that were found to affect women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Refugee girls and women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assaults during their flights and settlement. When they become a victim of sexual assaults, their own and the society’s perception of them being ‘immoral’ adds to their trauma of being assaulted resulting them in internalizing shame, have low self-esteem, self-isolation and hide from people (Logie et al., 2023).

### **Utilizing the Anti-oppressive approach in working with refugees**

The anti-oppressive concept works on the premise of oppression. Oppression is defined as involving “relations of domination that divide people into dominant or superior groups and subordinate or inferior ones” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 8). It involved a systematic devaluation of the attributes and contributions of the ‘inferior’ by the ‘superior’ and excluding them from the available social resources available by the latter (Dominelli, 2002). The social work profession which is defined as one that “promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” strongly resonates the idea of anti-oppressive practise (AOP) (Rush & Keenan, 2014). Scholars have used and contributed to the anti-oppressive approach in both research and practice in the field of social work. At the micro-level category of practice, Sakamoto & Pitner (2005) highlighted the limitations of anti-oppressive perspective in social work and emphasized on using critical consciousness to fill its gap. At the macro-level category of research, Rush & Keenan (2014) adopted an international comparative framework as a way to situate the debates and controversies surrounding anti-oppressive practice theorizations in social work. The anti-oppressive approach has also been utilized in working with refugees (Bilotta, 2020; Käkelä, 2020). Valtonen (2002) through a research note highlighted the role social workers

can potentially play through an anti-oppressive approach during refugees' initial settlement period in a host country, where the latter face difficulties in settling due to language difficulties, and unfamiliarity with the local culture and style of communicative engagement. Refugees often times are restrained by negative stereotypes among others which is a manifestation of oppression that constrains the relations between the individual as well as a society as a whole (Valtonen, 2002). Knowing the circumstances of the immigrants and equipped with the needed information to counter stereotypes, social workers can engage civil societies to challenge the misrepresentation or distortion of facts conflicted upon this group of marginalized people (Valtonen, 2002). Social work research, similar to practice can be understood as a "complex field with differing forms of power relationships that can perpetuate forms of oppression" (Rogers, 2012, p. 868). Therefore understanding the complex matrix of power relations which reveals the knower and the known; groups of knowers; the researcher, and what he/she knows and want to know, who does he/she brings to the research, and why does he/she wants to know provides a structure for social work researcher to situate him/herself in relation to the person/s studied (Baltra-Ulloa, 2014). "Constant attention is given to these relations, and care is taken to shift power from those removed from what is trying to be "known" to those closest to it- that is, those people with epistemic privilege or lived experience of the issue under study" as how Potts and Brown (2005) emphasized.

### **Conclusion**

The situation of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is characterised by complex dynamics influenced by various factors. Apart from those who fled Myanmar during the crisis, a significant number can be considered anticipatory refugees seeking family reunification and a new life in this predominantly Muslim country. However, those without connections or who find themselves detained in temporary holding sites face significant challenges, including high fees for boat travel and exorbitant loans for their release. Discrimination and violence against their community in Myanmar are forcing the Rohingya to leave the country as they collectively resent the conflicts affecting their fellow citizens. Malaysia's attraction lies in its religious identity, which offers a sense of belonging and security to a community persecuted in their homeland, where they can practise Islam freely and have access to important resources. In addition, the Rohingya play an important role in addressing Malaysia's labour shortage, particularly in low-skilled jobs, and make an important contribution to the informal economy. However, gender inequalities persist, with women facing additional barriers due to language and skills gaps, including limited opportunities for income-generating activities and access to formal employment. They are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, and societal perceptions of women as 'immoral' exacerbate their trauma, leading to low self-esteem and self-isolation. This multi-layered situation highlights the urgent need for support and protection for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

As the literature indicates, the Rohingya have notable cultural differences from the host population. Although their Islamic faith is consistent with that of the predominantly Muslim Malaysian population, the Rohingya, as an Indo-Aryan ethnic group, are culturally very distinct. This group of refugees has a distinct gender division of labour and a conservative way of life. Rohingya women and girls primarily take responsibility for domestic work, while men and boys are responsible for productive activities. Women often have limited mobility outside their homes, especially without their husbands or any male members of their family. Given

the different social structure, culture and language of this group of refugees and asylum seekers compared to the general population, it is important that social workers working with refugees tailor their team-based practises to the needs and preferences of this group, applying anti-oppressive social work principles. The challenges refugees and asylum seekers face in navigating the country and its various institutions, as well as negative stereotypes and discrimination, need to be understood and addressed in team-based social work practise. In cases where refugees cannot be offered collaborative or individual social work services due to institutional barriers within the institution where the social worker works, the social worker can refer them to other institutions with resources and capacity.

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