THE LAW, ETHICS & POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DISPLACEMENT:
Narratives of Bhutanese and Iraqi Refugees
DukeImmerse LEAPED (the law, ethics, and political economy of displacement) is a partnership between the Kenan Institute for Ethics and the Office of Undergraduate Education at Duke University. The twelve students in the program immersed themselves in the study of refugees and forced migration all day every day for an entire semester.

This work is dedicated to all of the refugees we met throughout our fieldwork. They shared their stories, their hearts, their hopes, and their homes with us, and we are deeply grateful.
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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the lead agency charged with refugee protection and resolution of refugee problems, acknowledges some 15 million persons worldwide as refugees. This is only a fraction of the nearly 50 million displaced persons throughout the world. Refugees, as defined by the UNHCR, are “persons who have fled from their home country and cannot return because they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.”

As straightforward as this definition seems, it’s more complex in real life. Was the persecution personally targeted? Is there a strong enough fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group? The answers to these questions define an individual as a refugee.

The seeming certainty of being classified as a refugee does not then lead to a certain future. There’s no set path to the next stage, no standard timeframe in which refugees move on. Most receive support in the country to which they fled until they can voluntarily and safely return to their home country. A small number of refugees are allowed to become citizens in the country to which they fled, and an even smaller number—primarily those who are at the highest risk—are resettled in a third country.

Most people associate refugee camps with the refugee experience, but camps are far from universal. Around the world, refugees live in broadly varying conditions: some in well-established camps, others in collective centers or makeshift shelters. More than half live in urban areas. All refugees, regardless of where they live, lack the basic protections of citizenship while they are displaced and have an ambiguous future. They have been uprooted and they’re not sure where or when they will be able to put down new roots again.

As students in DukeImmerse LEAPED (the law, ethics, and political economy of displacement), twelve of us spent an entire semester addressing a single question—how does displacement impact the social identities and wellbeing of those displaced?—taking four interrelated courses on the topic and living abroad for four weeks. In the process, we’ve come to understand the dynamics and drivers of global displacement, and we’ve gained particular insights into the experiences of Bhutanese refugees living in refugee camps in Nepal and Iraqi refugees living in Cairo.

While fewer than 1% of refugees worldwide will ever resettle, the US Department of State has given these two groups priority for resettlement, and many Iraqis and Bhutanese have now become our neighbors here in North Carolina. Having two distinct refugee populations move to your backyard is an incredible research opportunity. The Bhutanese in Nepal and the Iraqis in Cairo have followed vastly different displacement trajectories. Iraqi refugees have scattered themselves throughout the Middle East, with large concentrations in major cities like Cairo. Bhutanese refugees have been largely concentrated in camps in a single region on the plains of eastern Nepal. We studied these two very distinct groups through a comparative lens in order to develop a deeper understanding of the complex phenomena of displacement.

The contrasts are striking. The Bhutanese came from an agrarian society, and have been living in camps in Nepal for two decades—where they haven’t been able to farm—supported by international aid organizations. Some Bhutanese refugees have only ever known life in camps, where they’ve developed a strong sense of community. They approach the changes resettlement is bringing to their lives with a mixture of fear and excitement. Iraqi refugees tend to be highly educated professionals. They’ve fled their homes much more recently—and to countries that are consumed by unrest. Dispersed throughout Cairo, the Iraqi refugees we met have little sense of community and no secure basis of support.

We began where the journey of many of resettled Bhutanese and Iraqi refugees has typical refugee camps. We cannot ignore the international refugee problem.
porarily ended: here in Durham. We connected with local Bhutanese and Iraqi refugees over the course of the semester through community engagement projects and research. Our interactions with the communities here revealed the struggles they and other refugees face upon resettlement. The challenges of displacement continue even after refugees are given paths to citizenship in a new country.

The community engagement projects we developed addressed the challenges local refugees identified, particularly the idleness and isolation that many refugees face after resettlement. We created projects that would advance and promote skills in occupations the refugees pursued prior to resettlement. We hoped to engage refugees in the Durham community, and to create programs that will last long after the semester ends.

We also dove into research. We went abroad to study the displacement experience of Bhutanese and Iraqi refugee populations—after first being trained in the methods and ethics of field-based research—six of us living in Cairo, Egypt, and six in Damak, Nepal, for most of March.

We connected with refugees and conducted a series of life story interviews with them. Life story interviews involve asking broad, open-ended questions that encourage people to discuss their experiences as children, spouses, parents, and friends; to recount significant experiences that exemplify values that are important to them; and to imagine themselves in the future. We focused on what a typical day entails; family and community; religion and values; health and mental health; and significant life events. Sometimes we asked the refugees to list things—like significant life events—using that as a point of departure for conversation. Other times we used methods like mapping exercises to initiate conversation, asking interviewees to draw their first home or a place that made them feel safe. In Cairo, we also held a series of focus groups with Iraqi women.

Each of us had an individual theme in mind as we explored the question of how displacement affects the moral worlds of refugees. What possibilities exist for them to live a life of meaning? What goals, dreams, and relationships did they value before they were forced to flee their homes? How has displacement affected their ability to pursue the things they held dear? Has displacement fundamentally changed their beliefs about what is good and bad in the world?

The answers we got illuminated the circumstances surrounding each refugee’s displacement. We were told how they managed to sustain their lives on a day-to-day basis. And we also learned how the experience of displacement has shaped each person’s sense of identity, memories of the past, and hopes for the future. Fieldwork provided each of us with rich content for our research projects; a significant added benefit of our work was developing relationships with the extraordinary individuals we interviewed. Sitting beside the refugees and listening as they told us their stories brought the global issues we had studied here at Duke closer to heart. The experience of displacement came alive in the words and expressions of refugees themselves.

We’ve written these essays to explain the lived experience of displacement, to put a human face on this growing global problem, and to frame refugee issues in individual terms, something mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends, widows—humans—experience.

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Beginning in the early 1990s, members of an ethnic minority population living in southern Bhutan began to flee rising levels of violence and persecution at the hands of the Bhutanese government. Denied their citizenship rights due to religious and cultural differences, the group eventually sought protection in UNHCR-established refugee camps in Nepal. Ultimately, the number of refugees swelled to over 100,000, housed in seven camps in eastern Nepal.

Initially, the international community hoped that the Nepali government would integrate the Bhutanese refugees and offer them access to Nepali citizenship. However, Nepal was consumed by political upheaval of its own, including a Maoist rebellion that began in 1995, and continued for the next decade, ultimately overthrowing the monarchy. Political instability and the challenges posed by other refugees already living in Nepal meant that integrating the Bhutanese refugees into Nepal wasn’t a viable option. The Nepali government has entered into repeated talks with the Bhutanese government to negotiate the safe return of the refugees to their homes, all of which have failed. In 2006, all parties decided that third-country resettlement was the only option for the Bhutanese refugees to enjoy the protections of citizenship.

Since early 2008, over 60,000 refugees have been resettled to eight countries. The vast majority—more than 50,000—have been resettled to the United States. Currently, between 400 and 500 refugees leave Nepal each week, bound for a new life in a new country. While resettlement offers excitement and hope for a secure future, it also brings daily changes for all Bhutanese refugees. Those who are departing face the anxiety of leaving behind friends and the comforts of lives they have known for nearly twenty years, heading to a foreign land filled with unfamiliar traditions and unknown challenges. Those who remain, either awaiting the opportunity to resettle or holding onto hope that they will be able to return to Bhutan or stay in Nepal, face the loss of neighbors, companions, and family members. Parents lose children, siblings become separated by continents, and extended families separate.

Each change that is experienced on a personal level has a large impact at the camp level. Schools lose teachers, principals, and counselors. Camp committees lose leaders. Entire camps close, as dwindling numbers allow for consolidation. This ensures more reliable aid delivery, but it also dismantles communities. Three camps remain—Khudunabari, Sanischare, and Beldangi—and Khudunabari is expected to close by the end of June 2012.

Bhutanese refugees have been resettled all over the United States. They receive basic employment and educational support from federally funded programs. Many refugees look forward to resettlement so that they can be reunited with family members. Others focus on an education or the prospect of a new career, tempering their hopes with the knowledge that the education and skills they developed in the camps might not enable them to immediately achieve their goals. Other refugees resettle because they realize that they have no other choice, and they risk being completely alone and separated from their loved ones if they do not go. Still others want to discover new
things and to experience life in a country with a developed economy and a stable political system.

Several international aid organizations help to manage and organize the camps in Nepal. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, and the World Food Programme are the largest. The World Food Programme distributes rations every two weeks to households in allotments that allow each person to have 2,100 calories per day, mostly from beans, rice, and vitamin supplements, not fruits or vegetables. Remittances and work in Nepal’s informal economy are therefore important revenue streams, providing the means with which families can supplement rations and purchase clothing, personal items, and materials for their homes.

Life in the camps can be very difficult. Hard work is mixed with extreme idleness. Refugees must build and repair their own huts and transport heavy loads on their backs. Skilled workers can spend hours sewing or practicing metalwork or carpentry. The camps offer little in the way of recreation, and there are no opportunities for legal paid employment in Nepal. For a community that strongly values an active lifestyle and hard work, there’s little chance to put these values to productive use.

Nepalis have had mixed reactions to Bhutanese refugees in their midst. The camps have been blamed for deforestation in eastern Nepal. The cheap labor provided by the refugees has both increased competition for the extremely limited number of available jobs and stimulated the economy. Many

Nepalis who reside in the towns closest to the camps have developed relationships with the refugees, with some marriages taking place. They value the connections they have made with the refugees, and regret their departure and the prospect of the economic and social changes brought by the closing of the camps.

Bhutanese refugees have suffered from the injustices they faced in Bhutan and their expulsion from the country. More suffering continued in the camps and persists through resettlement. However, some improvement has also come in the camps and through resettlement. The refugee life stories we’ll present in our essays speak to some of the sadness, joy, hope, and friendship we witnessed while in the camps.
THERE ARE MANY THINGS you expect to see walking down the dusty main road of a refugee camp: a medical center, a food distribution site, a water pump, or perhaps even a community center. The last thing I anticipated seeing in the mazes of thatched bamboo huts in the Khudunabari camp was the faded red lettering of a sign reading “Rose Beauty Parlor.” Rose Beauty Parlor is in an area of Khudunabari that provides services and assistance to women refugees. Just adjacent to the beauty parlor is a larger hut serving as the headquarters for the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum (BRWF), which offers services ranging from tailoring lessons to microfinance loan programs. It’s an essential source of advocacy, representation, and opportunities for Bhutanese refugee women—so why, then, does a Human Rights Watch report describe them as a population “trapped by inequality?”

The changing obligations and responsibilities of women in the Bhutanese refugee camps illustrate how displacement can challenge traditional gender norms and relations. Some sociological studies suggest that displaced women face a paradoxical situation as gender roles are reconstructed in ways that can perpetuate both improvements and hindrances to equality. Resettlement within

Displacing Traditional Gender Roles

by HEATHER DURHAM
AN ELDERLY WOMAN spins yarn outside her hut. Many women make yarn to provide income for their families.
Nepal: The Roles of Bhutanese Refugee Women

camps often increases the ability of women to develop more self-defined roles through greater opportunities to access education and employment. However, even as women become more empowered, these improvements are often undermined by a social and legal infrastructure that reinforces inequalities.

Traditional Obligations to the Family
Some historical and cultural background will help explain how and why female roles have changed in the Bhutanese refugee population. 48-year-old Susmita described her experience with the old traditions of domination that characterized the predominantly patriarchal Bhutanese culture in which she grew up. Women took care of the home; men held all of the authority and decision-making power within families. As Susmita reflected on her childhood in Bhutan, her memories illustrated the limitations this imposed on many of the women refugees.

Susmita placed particular importance on the local school. “If given the chance for an education,” she said, “I would have taken the opportunity to learn how to write.” When Susmita was 12 years old, her fate, to be uneducated, was sealed when her mother became very sick. She assumed the responsibility of caring for her thirteen family members, completing tasks around the home, and watching over the fields and livestock. These obligations prevented her from attending school, and now she is unhappy because she understands how important education is. When asked if this was typical in Bhutanese culture, Susmita said that it was tradition for sons to go to school, but not daughters. “Looking at the camp situation now,” Susmita noted, “education seems to be equal among boys and girls and everyone is going to school. There is no longer the discrimination of girls having to stay home and boys attending school.”

Social Progress Towards Equality
Indeed, opportunities for education and employment are increasing for women. As Koushila, a 22-year-old paid volunteer at the BRWF, explained, “Before, society was set up so that women could not go outside of the home to work, they only worked in the kitchen. Now, people are civilized and they allow daughters to work.” The increasingly diverse roles of women was apparent as our team walked through the camps and observed the refugees completing their daily responsibilities. Certainly, women were still overwhelmingly participating in domestic tasks. It was nearly guaranteed that we would spot a woman concentrating on the thread winding through her small loom or a group of women and girls working in tandem to wash dishes under the flow of the water pump. Yet, in addition to completing more traditional domestic tasks, women often could be found working side-by-side with men. In the Sanischare camp, we saw an adolescent girl standing waist deep in swampy mud, shoveling alongside her father and brothers.

Nima, a 43-year-old mother, voiced the opinion of many women in the camps in explaining that she wanted to earn money to alleviate some of her family’s financial problems. She found a job making organic fertilizer and completed the training program despite her lack of formal education. The money Nima earns provides additional vegetables to supplement her family’s rations. When added to existing domestic obligations, employment can interfere with freedom to pursue other opportunities in the camp. Many women we spoke to had to postpone or give up their schooling in order to provide for their families. Damanta, a 19-year-old from the Sanischare camp, told us about how she attended school until class four (the equivalent of fourth grade in the US, 11-12 years old), but then was forced to stop in order to provide for her family, headed by her disabled father.

Empowerment through Camp Programming
Not all progress in women’s roles and responsibilities is the result of naturally shifting social attitudes and perspectives. In fact, the first of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) Five Commitments to Refugee Women is to “encourage the active participation of women in all management and leadership committees of refugees in urban, rural, and camp settings.” In 2006, the UNHCR made explicit efforts in all of the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal to encourage female participation in the Camp Management Committee elections. Consequently, for the first time, over half of the candidates were women. Since then, the Camp Management Committees continue to pride themselves on the equal representation of women in leadership positions. Many other community-based organizations and institutions in the camps have adopted a similar language of equality in their policies and have

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implemented programming providing leadership training and employment opportunities for women.

Susmita, who now works for the BRWF, arrived in Khununabari with nothing. Her husband was very sick and unable to work. She wandered around the camp begging for money, but no one believed her story. Growing increasingly depressed and hopeless, she applied for a loan from BRWF. Women seeking capital for startups can apply for BRWF loans up to 10,000 rupees. BRWF’s goal is for these women to make enough from their businesses to build savings and get on a more firm financial footing.

Susmita received a 5,000 rupee loan to open a small general store in the camp. Success wasn’t instantaneous. At first, she took in 4 rupees per day. She adjusted her inventory to meet customer demands and soon business boomed. She began selling 50 rupees worth of merchandise a day, and then more than 80, and set aside 20 rupees a day in savings. After twenty days in business, she finally felt encouraged by the increasing sales, thinking to herself, “I can do it, it’s going well.” Because of her success, neighbors were now willing to loan 3,000 rupees to help her husband, when they wouldn’t even loan her 30 rupees before. Now, she’s proud to be able to provide for her family and ensure that her children can receive an education.

Susmita’s story is an example of how displacement has actually fostered women’s self-sufficiency. Camp-instituted leadership training, management committees, and forums provide representation and support that women like her may not have had access to before. Priya, a 50-year-old participant at the BRWF, explained that when they were in Bhutan, there was opposition by the government and no forum for women to voice their opinions. However, the BRWF in the camps provided a means for women to gather, share their ideas, and talk about their feelings. “Before my time in the BRWF,” Priya said, “it felt like being in a dark room, but now we have the BRWF activities and things to learn, and we can express ourselves.”

Programming specifically for women was first created in the camps, the BRWF program manager in Sanischare explained, because women were particularly oppressed soon after Bhutanese refugees moved to camps in Nepal. For a time, domestic violence was a serious problem. Oxfam and other agencies stepped in to create domestic violence reduction programs.
that gave women a new place to appeal cases of violence and receive other support. Interestingly, these strong and accessible support systems are infrequently used.

**Resettlement as a Stressor on Gender Roles**

Today, Bhutanese refugee camps are characterized by a surprising absence of gender violence. Widespread gender violence is common in other refugee camps worldwide and is a continual concern for UNHCR as it attempts to implement protections for female refugees. Gender violence among refugees is correlated with the stress and instability of displacement as traditional gender roles are disrupted. Yet conversations with both refugees and camp administrators confirm that domestic violence or gender violence is rare in Bhutanese camps. The few cases that were mentioned were attributed to isolated marital disputes or old patterns of violence dating back to life in Bhutan.

Marital disputes and quarreling are on the rise, sparked by the uncertainty and instability caused by resettlement. Since the resettlement process began in 2007, divorce has become increasingly common as couples disagree over when to resettle, where to resettle, or whether to resettle at all. Some of these disputes have turned violent, sometimes fueled by alcohol. However, the BRWF is vigilant in responding to these few incidents and sends counselors to huts where disputes are reported.

**Dependent Roles Reinforced by Legal Structures**

While resettlement can cause stress for a couple, tensions also emerge when resettlement to a new country is not an option for some family members. Many of the refugees we spoke with explained how intermarriage between Nepali citizens and refugees has complicated and impeded the resettlement process for themselves or a family member. 30-year-old Bishnu described how her husband, a local Nepali citizen, refuses to allow her and their two children to resettle without him. She needs her husband’s signature in order to leave with their children, but he does not want the family to separate and refuses to comply. Bishnu explained, “If the resettlement agencies would allow husbands to be resettled, then we would go.” Unfortunately, this is rarely the case for husbands who are Nepali citizens and not included in the resettlement process.

Bishnu’s situation highlights the struggles facing many of the Bhutanese refugees and illuminates broader problems of laws and policies that reinforce the dependent roles of females. The legal structure of Nepal and many UNHCR policies perpetuate patriarchal family roles by allocating many of women’s rights and entitlements based upon their relations to fathers, brothers, or husbands. As Keith Kadlec, a US Embassy official for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, explained, Nepali laws are often unfavorable to women. Children can’t obtain citizenship cards until they are 18 years old. Fathers must accompany their children, and if the father is absent, the child is left stateless without the father to assert citizenship on the child’s behalf. Mothers may attempt to vouch for the child, but recognition is not guaranteed. When it comes to resettlement, refugee women married to Nepali men can’t bring their husbands to resettle with them and are forced to stay in the camps or accept family separation. However, refugee men who are married to Nepali women can stay together.

The disparity is explained by a 2008 resettlement bulletin by the UNHCR stating that a refugee woman married to a Nepali man is able to naturalize in Nepal and “such women do not require international protection and resettle-
ment as a durable solution.” The woman’s status as a dependent means that “she would therefore no longer be a refugee.” However, this kind of naturalization is both difficult and rare, often leaving women in a position of vulnerability as they can neither gain citizenship nor resettle. One refugee described the hardship facing his daughter, whose Nepali husband disappeared after fathering two children. She needs her husband’s signature in order to resettle with their children, yet the fact that he has been missing for over six years makes this a highly unlikely possibility. Now, she has returned to live in her father’s hut. While the rest of her siblings resettle, she remains confined to the camp because “there seems to be no solution for her custody issues.”

Hope for Future Opportunities

The experiences of the Bhutanese refugee women we spoke to illuminate the broader ways in which displacement can mean increased agency in certain domains of familial and social relations and simultaneous decreased agency in others. Although old cultural traditions of domination persist, Susmita noted, “Slowly, people are starting to gain more understanding.” Growing access to education and employment provides women with opportunities for greater independence within the camps, or as Nima put it, “It is good in the community to be independent because then you don’t need to be dependent on your husband.”

Much hope continues to rest on the prospect of resettlement. Though Damanta was forced to stop her education in the camp, she dreams of attending nursing school after resettlement. Many women expressed similar aspirations to pursue schooling and provide their children with an education in a country of resettlement. For now, women still living in the camps continue to rely on the programming and opportunities provided by organizations like the BRWF as a source of empowerment and a pathway to greater equality. Voicing the sentiments of many women in the BRWF, Priya declared her hope: “Wherever I resettle, I will have access to such a forum.”

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An elderly man sitting outside his hut.
WE MET KAAVYA, A 63-YEAR-OLD Bhutanese woman from the Beldangi refugee camp in Nepal, in Greensboro, North Carolina. She and twenty other Bhutanese senior citizens there participate in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class for older resettled refugees. Reflecting on her move, Kaavya said, “When I think about Nepal, I think about how miserable I was. . . . I like America.” One of the men in her ESL class disagreed. “I am too old to have come to a new country…too old to start a new life.” He would have preferred to live in Nepal and to die there rather than to be resettled so far away.

One month later, in March 2012, six of us travelled 7,700 miles to the Sanischare camp near Damak, Nepal, where Kaavya had also lived. At the Older Person Recreation Center in the middle of the camp, these same two sentiments were echoed. Some older Bhutanese refugees were excited about resettlement and the prospect of starting a new life in the United States; others, like Kumar, who spends every afternoon at the center, were content with the life they had established in the camp after being ejected from Bhutan twenty years prior.

We also heard a third sentiment—a desire to return to Bhutan and the agricultural homelands that were seized by the Bhutanese government. Dipendra, a Bhutanese senior who resides in the Beldangi camp, is determined to go back to Bhutan: “I would rather try to go..."
back to Bhutan and fight with the government than resettle.”

Elders in the refugee camps in Nepal can be categorized into three groups based on their different perspectives on resettlement. The first group—Dipendra’s—wants to return to Bhutan and the lives they knew there. The second group—Kumar’s—wants to remain in the refugee camps in Nepal, where they’ve established lives, believing that they are too old to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle. Kaavya’s group embraces resettlement. Their years in the camp have been difficult. They welcome a new beginning and focus on the next generation, rather than their own betterment.

Seniors form a large and important subsection of the refugee population worldwide. 8.5 percent of the overall refugee population the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) works with are 60 and older. Of the refugees being processed by the UNHCR for third-country resettlement, 30 percent are 60 and older. According to the UNHCR’s policy on older refugees, elders often serve “as formal and informal leaders of communities; they are valuable resources for guidance and advice, and transmitters of culture, skills and crafts that are important in preserving the traditions of the dispossessed and displaced.”

The experience of older refugees is an interesting subject because seniors are often forgotten when compared to the younger generations who have more urgent and pressing issues such as finding jobs and caring for children, according to that same policy manual. However, elders can provide important insight into the perspectives of their broader communities. Furthermore, they face unique emotional and economic challenges as they age in refugee camps and cope with resettlement to distant countries.

Dipendra
73-year-old Dipendra lives in the Beldangi camp. Back in Bhutan, he was a low-level elected government official. We interviewed him in his bamboo hut, where he didn’t want to tell us about his life in the camp: “I do not care about my life at this time.” Rather, he wanted us to know about his former life in Bhutan. For Dipendra, the past was the most meaningful. He had fond memories of his Bhutanese home and described this time period as a “golden life,” a time when he could “gain great enjoyment by playing with friends, playing in the forest, and eating blueberries, oranges, and lemons.”

Although Bhutanese refugees are essentially cut off from their former connections in Bhutan, Dipendra asserted that he maintains his political involvement even while living in the camps. As a young adult in Bhutan, he served in the Bhutan State Congress. Now, he regularly corresponds with India’s Minister of External Affairs, and he’s written to the president of Nepal suggesting an action plan for repatriation in Bhutan. Dipendra’s actions reflect his resolve to return to his home in Bhutan and suggest that he has an expectation that his former political connections will give him a voice in Bhutanese resettlement decisions at the national level. However, our discussions with humanitarian aid officials in Damak made it clear that for most Bhutanese refugees, repatriation is no longer an option as negotiations between Nepal and Bhutan have repeatedly failed to reach an agreement on the matter.

Although Dipendra is aware of these failed negotiations, he remains determined to return to Bhutan. His recollection of life twenty years ago is a constant reminder of his dissatisfaction with the quality of his current life in the camp, from his poorly constructed home to the lack of appropriate food for his diabetes. Of course, Dipendra’s memory of his home in Bhutan is framed by his forced and abrupt departure from his life there, and his longing for Bhutan is shaped by the physical and conceptual distance between the cramped and unhealthy environment in which he now lives and his green and expansive homestead in Bhutan. He clings to a past that seems more familiar and appealing than his current situation—while simultaneously rejecting the prospect of resettlement in a new country.

Kumar and the Older Person Recreation Center
Kumar from Sanischare was eager to talk about his life in the refugee camps and the ties to the community he had established there. He does not want to be resettled. As an older man, he recognized that it would be difficult to start a new life in a foreign country.

There are four factors that influence why a portion of the elder generation wishes to remain in Nepal: 1) elders command a level of respect in the Nepali
Kumar, at 60 plus years and one of the most senior members of the community, is respected by those who are younger than he. Life expectancy for a Bhutanese refugee is around 65, a little higher than Nepal’s average life expectancy of age 60. As younger Bhutanese approach Kumar, they use the formal greeting “Namaskar,” rather than the more informal greeting “Namaste.” Kumar is the head of his household, and per Bhutanese custom, he is responsible for health and financial issues, a hierarchy that has changed little since he moved from Bhutan to Nepal.

Kumar’s life in Sanischare is stable and predictable, and he enjoys the relationships that he has formed with other refugees. Sanischare elders share a routine: get up at 6am, eat a small breakfast prepared by the younger women in the household, hang out at the senior center from 10am to 3pm, have dinner at home and go to bed around 8pm. Kumar has developed many good relationships in the five hours a day he spends at the Older Person Recreation Center, a round, open bamboo pagoda within a small complex of the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum buildings. Elders spend their time there singing, reading from holy books, sharing their feelings, and building community. Kumar remarked that he did not want to give up these relationships when he resettled. Another man at the Center revealed his anxiety about moving to the United States and not having a similar place to “share my feelings with others who understand me.”

The activities at the Older Person Recreation Center mirror traditional Bhutanese cultural practices. Elders maintained these customs in less formal surroundings before the Older Person Recreation Center was established. Kumar recalled, “Originally, we used to meet in the hills outside the camp, rain or shine, to sing, dance, read from holy books, and share our feelings. However, when it was extremely hot or rainy the trek to the hills was difficult for the elders and the BRWF built us this pagoda, so that we could meet in the camp.” The Older Person Recreation Center provides so much camaraderie that Dipesh, a 60-year-old night security guard in Sanischare, gives up sleep during the day to attend, getting by on about two hours of rest. He explained, “I really love my community and my friends very much and they like me a lot in return too.”

Anxiety about resettlement and how it would change their lives was a theme expressed by several daily visitors to the Center. Dipesh said, “I...
do not want to leave the place I love so much. I do not want to go to the United States.” He emphasized his contributions to enhance the physical attractiveness of the camp. He “put a lot of time” into making the area he guards “beautiful by planting flowers.” He worried that after he was gone, no one would care for these flowers.

Another fear that was voiced multiple times by the refugees at the Center was the inability to communicate in a new country after resettlement. One man asked, “How will I be able to ask for chilies and salt if I do not speak English?” Similarly, Kumar said, to nods and laughs from his peers, “I would not be suited to learn a hard language such as English because I sometimes forget my own language!”

The seniors at the Center additionally worried that they are too old to want to start a new life, preferring to stay in Nepal. Despite their reluctance, most have decided to leave. “My sons have started the resettlement process and I will go with them,” Dipesh sighed. As head of household, this should have been his decision, but Dipesh indicated that he would do what his sons want. Kumar will also move with his family, he said, despite his reluctance. He knows that the UNHCR is working to have the camps closed by 2015, and understands that means that everyone is to be resettled.

Kaavya

Kaavya has overcome feelings of reluctance and anxiety about resettlement since she relocated to Greensboro, North Carolina, more than a year ago. She’s happy in her current situation and optimistic about her family’s future life in the United States. She described potlucks where she and 25-30 Bhutanese refugee neighbors gather to sing, dance, laugh, and eat. These gatherings connect her with the past, she said, and she is also focusing on the future, taking adult English classes even though it’s a difficult, slow process.

Kaavya said that she was miserable in the Beldangi camp because her husband was sick and she had to work to put her children through school. She described numerous onerous tasks she performed to ensure that her family was well-provided for: “I worked in the tea garden for ten years to pay for my daughter’s education and after working all day I would make thread from wool by tying it together. I also took care of my husband who did not work due to medical problems.” Kaavya’s dissatisfaction with her refugee life of hard work contrasted with her happier memory of the life she had in Bhutan where her husband was able to support the family. She said, “I like Bhutan best because I was born there, next America, then Nepal.” The change Kaavya experienced moving from Bhutan to the camps might explain her frustration with life in Nepal. Though she spoke fondly of Bhutan, she had no illusions that she would be able to repatriate.

Rather, she embraced her new life in the United States with the optimistic view that things were better not only for her, but also for her grandchildren: “I like America. It is good for my granddaughter.”

Conclusion

As these elders shared their views as to where they would prefer to live—Bhutan, Nepal or the United States—their differences in opinions seemed to be partially dependent on their ability to adapt to new social roles and responsibilities. Twenty years ago, in Bhutan, they lived as farmers, harvesting sugar cane and barley. The extended family lived together—elderly parents, their sons, sons’ wives, and grandchildren. The elderly parents were treated with respect by the younger family members as they were in charge of the household.

After being evicted from their lands by the Bhutanese authorities, the refugees fled to Nepal and created new lives in camps there. No longer farmers, aging Bhutanese refugees lost most of their ability to contribute economically to their families. The elderly were still treated with respect; yet there was a shift of family decision-making from the elders to their children. Had the refugees been allowed to remain on their farms in Bhutan, the elders would have continued to command authority in their families and communities. In the camps, the younger generation has increasingly made the major decisions.

Although their social status may have diminished, some senior Bhutanese adapted to the new environment. During their two decades in the camps, life became routine and agreeable for many, transforming the refugee camps into “home” for these elders. Many, like Kumar, now prefer to remain in the comfortable rhythms of their lives in the camps rather than to be resettled to a new country. Others cannot let go of dreams to return to Bhutan, the only place they can imagine as a real home.

A third group, as exemplified by Kaavya, did not find satisfaction in the refugee camps, yet have understood that they cannot repatriate to Bhutan. When offered the option of resettlement to a third country, generally the United States, they welcomed this option, as it meant education for their grandchildren and economic opportunity for their children. Acquiring a new language and assimilating to a distinct culture would be a challenge, but one these seniors were willing to make.

As the refugee camps will be closing, most Bhutanese refugees will be resettled to a new country within the next five years. Regardless of their perspective, all older refugees face the daunting challenge of navigating a new culture.
The United States accepts up to 80,000 refugees a year, more than any other country in the world. We bring refugees within our borders and help them to adjust to lingual and cultural differences. Through financial assistance and social involvement facilitated by aid organizations, we design and implement resettlement programs for the newest members of our society. The resettlement programs reflect our assumptions about the wishes and perceptions of refugees, particularly regarding the idea of success.

Americans have varied priorities for refugees, including social involvement, economic productivity, self-sufficiency, fulfillment of needs, and community engagement as markers of resettled refugees’ success. It makes sense to ask how refugees themselves conceptualize success. Do the two sets of goals and aspirations compete with or complement each other?

The life stories from Nepal show how some Bhutanese refugees define “success.” If Bhutanese refugees’ views of success do not align with American goals, the refugees may have difficulty adjusting to programs that do not target their self-defined needs and interests. If their perspectives are compatible with American goals, this might provide for smoother resettlement. Three refugees’ life stories illustrate how success is intertwined with education, employment, community, autonomy, and family.

Success through Education and Employment
We met Indra, age 27, through the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum (BRWF) in the Khudunabari camp, where she was the loan coordinator. Indra stood out because she was

by GRACE BENSON
extremely well educated and independent, worked outside the home, and raised her daughter alone while her husband lived in India. Indra's emphasis on education and employment were central to her views of success.

Indra began the interview by describing her life in Bhutan, where her family lived in poverty. Her father had lost his job when the government of Bhutan began to implement discriminatory policies against people of her family's ethnic background. Indra explained that her family never had enough food and lamented, “I cannot forget the suffering.” They left for Nepal to seek a better life, but were met with more hardship during the first few years at the camp. We asked Indra how she was able to overcome her suffering and she responded, “I moved past it through my education.” Caritas, a Catholic organization that runs the elementary schools in the camps, sponsored Indra to attend college in Bhadrapur, a nearby city. When Caritas could no longer supply funding, her boyfriend at the time (now her husband) paid her university fees. Indra’s boyfriend was not able to stay in school himself because he had to earn money for his family, but always encouraged her education. His emotional and financial support of Indra’s studies was unusual, especially as they were unmarried and he was not well educated himself.

Indra sat up straighter and maintained eye contact as she told us about her studies in college. Smiling, Indra said she excelled in an optional math class and decided to pursue business and accounting. Indra solemnly said that she considered education to be extremely important. Through her choices favoring education and her emphasis on school, Indra showed that she valued education as an integral part of her definition of a successful life. This was also demonstrated in her relationships with her one-year-old daughter. When asked about her hopes for her daughter’s future, Indra said, “I want her to study, learn dancing, singing, be educated and speak English like an American.” Indra frequently encouraged her daughter to learn and practice English. Indra’s dreams for her daughter indicated that she considered a good education to be an aspect of a successful life.

In addition to education, Indra also pointed to employment as a hallmark of success. She had worked at the BRWF for two years, and had previously taught economics in the Khudunabari camp. Because her husband lived in India for his job and visited only every few months, Indra lived with her in-laws and together they cared for her daughter. Indra smiled and began to talk more freely and animatedly as she described her work as a loan officer for the BRWF. She showed great pride in this job, a prestigious position awarded after years of education and work experience. Indra’s life story showed her satisfaction in her successes through education and employment.

Success through Autonomy and Community
Susmita, age 48, was another woman we met through the BRWF in Khudunabari. She explained that she served in several leadership roles in the camp, including positions on the Camp Management Committee, the Community Watch Team, and the BRWF. Through her stories about her early life in Bhutan and leadership work in the camp, it became apparent that she viewed success in terms of education, economic productivity, autonomy, and respect from her community.

As a young girl in Bhutan, Susmita was unable to attend school because she had too many responsibilities in her home. Forty years later, Susmita had tears in her eyes as she said, “I wish I could have learned just up to Class 2, so I could know how to write. I could not do this. I’m sad because now I understand the importance of education.” Even after two decades, Susmita regretted her lack of education as a child, demonstrating that she considered education to be a priority for a good life. Susmita mourned her missed opportunity to attend school, and consequently, she was determined for her family to be educated. Susmita used her wages to help educate her family members, showing that like Indra, she considered education to be an important part of success and achievement.

Susmita also perceived success through the lens of economic productivity. She had to provide for her six children when she and her husband moved to Khudunabari. Her husband was very sick and could not work. Therefore, Susmita attempted to borrow money from other refugees. However, her community did not trust her and would not help. Susmita was left alone and depressed until she applied to a BRWF program, and she was granted a loan to start her own business. At first, Susmita was fearful that she would not be able to repay her loan because she could only earn a few rupees per day. Over time, Susmita learned to stock her store with popular merchandise and steadily earned more profits. She invested her profits, and eventually, her business was a success. While discussing her self-proclaimed “success in business,” Susmita was smiling joyfully, and talked about how her life improved after she was able to make money through her store.

Still smiling, Susmita stated that after her success in business, people in her community were happy to help her or to loan her money. A vital portion of her life story is her community’s changing perception of her, from distrust to acceptance. Susmita felt successful in part because of the acceptance and respect she has achieved through her hard work and commitment to the community. Sus-
mita’s choices for what to include in her life story showed that she strongly valued education, economic achievement, and community relations in the pursuit of a successful life.

Her life story also showed her valuation of autonomy as an indicator of success, as indicated by her statement, “To be successful, I think it’s important to believe in myself and find strength in that.” She was proud to be self-reliant, providing for her children financially and helping them to be educated. As a consultant for the BRWF’s domestic violence cases, Susmita persuaded other women to be similarly autonomous. She counseled families and encouraged people to express themselves, explore their emotions, and escape abusive situations. Susmita pushed other women to speak up for themselves. Through Susmita’s choices of what to emphasize in her life story and her expression of her priorities, she demonstrated that she perceived success to include education, employment, community, and autonomy.

Success through Family and Employment

At age 22, Koushila was already a wife and a mother. In our discussion, she highlighted the significance of family in her perception of a successful life. However, like Indra and Susmita, Koushila also valued work and education saying, “Student life is important to me.” She began her life story by discussing her parents and their role in her education. Her father supported her academic endeavors and encouraged her to strive for higher education. He used to say, “My dream is to make Koushila a graduate student.” He wanted his only daughter to get a good education. However, after Koushila married, she could not fulfill his wish.

Koushila met her husband through the Youth Friendly Center, a camp organization that provides programs for refugee youth, where he was a fellow music coordinator. Their friendship gradually grew into a love relationship, and then resettlement policies coaxed them to consider marriage. Because each child is resettled with his or her family, they feared they would be permanently separated if they were not legally married before resettlement. Therefore, they eloped without telling their parents. Koushila knew her father would disapprove because he wanted her to graduate first. Eventually her parents found out and were disappointed, but accepted the union because Koushila was their only daughter. However, Koushila’s father continued to regret that Koushila could not further her education.

By choosing to become a wife and mother, Koushila chose the opportunity for a family over her education, as she was not able to pursue further schooling because of her duties to her husband and infant son. Most of her
time was dedicated to childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Additionally, Koushila worked at the BRWF, although her husband objected and told her to remain at home with their son. Koushila, however, felt compelled to be active outside her home and obtained employment. She saved her earnings for her son, showing the continued value of family to her. But she also values the active lifestyle and autonomy she enjoys through her job. Koushila remarked that a society is only “civilized” when women can work. Her responsibilities to her work, which required taking time away from her family each day, created a challenge for her to balance her competing commitments. In this case, however, unlike the choice she faced between marriage and education, it is possible for her to pursue both of the things she values, her work and her family.

Closing Thoughts
The women described above differ in age, life experiences, priorities, and daily experiences. However, they also share striking similarities in their conceptions of success as entailing autonomy, family, community, education, and employment. All three women placed value on autonomy as they navigated through their multiple responsibilities. Indra, Susmita, and Koushila also valued family. This is evident through their hard work to aid their families economically, and the considerable time they invested caring for their children. Susmita also demonstrated a concern for attaining respect from the community and contributing to her community. Furthermore, all the women emphasized the importance of education, even though Koushila herself ultimately chose marriage over school. Most importantly, each woman valued her employment and economic productivity. All of the women worked for the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum (BRWF) and expressed their pride and satisfaction in their positions. Indra’s job is the result of her success in school, Susmita’s life was changed through an opportunity in the BRWF, and Koushila asserted her independence through employment. This has positive implications for the existing US resettlement programs that encourage women to obtain jobs.

In different ways, each of these women has achieved some measure of what success means to them. They find pride and joy in their achievements. The United States accepts refugees as new but permanent members of our society, and therefore, we have a responsibility to help them adjust and thrive in their new environment. This task will be eased if the refugees’ goals and ideas about success correlate with the goals of resettlement programs. The common themes in these women’s stories point to employment, autonomy, family, and education as important goals for a successful life. Similarly, American programs emphasize social involvement, autonomy, employment, fulfillment of needs, and community engagement. This suggests we have reason to be hopeful about the prospects for Bhutanese refugees resettling in the US. The Bhutanese are driven to work hard and to be productive in society, similar to Americans. Resettlement programs that continue to encourage these values can help Bhutanese refugees to achieve their own versions of success.
MANY ACADEMIC STUDIES of refugee religion have placed it in the context of resettlement, explaining religion as a guide for behavior as refugees confront drastic changes in their lives, as a way to maintain traditional values, and as a tool to form new communities and social networks. I went to Nepal interested in whether any or all of these processes were at work in the Bhutanese refugee camps prior to resettlement, since the life story interviews we would conduct would allow us to explore the role of religion through individual stories about family and community. The Bhutanese refugees there had lived in refugee camps for nearly 20 years, and I wanted to learn how religion influenced individual values and day-to-day interactions. I also wanted to better understand how religious beliefs and practices change over time.

The case of the Bhutanese refugees is especially interesting because there are five distinct religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Kirat, and Hari Dharma—that are practiced in the refugee camps. It raises the question of how such religious pluralism might affect interactions among the refugees in the camps and how religion may or may not create meaning for them.

The refugees we interviewed spoke about religion’s influence on factors as varied as their physical health, addiction, community, and identity. Some described their beliefs as a tool for self-improvement, a source of security, or the driving force behind meaningful relationships with neighbors and friends. Others spoke about religious differences as a divisive factor in the camps.

Religious Tolerance
As we explored the camps, we saw symbols of all five religions, which hinted to me that the five religions peacefully coexisted in the camps. One of our first mornings in the Sanischare camp, we wove our way around the paths between bamboo huts, familiarizing ourselves with the camp, and stopped to speak with three family members sitting outside a hut. The elderly woman wore about five inches of bangles on each arm, a nose ring, elaborate gold earrings, and multiple chains around her neck. Embedded amid all her jewelry was a sign of her religion: two cloth strings she wore around her neck. I had not even noticed these before she pulled them out. The strings were a gift from a Hindu priest as a blessing for “bet-
terment.” After this woman had shown me these necklaces, I began to notice them more frequently on people of all ages and genders.

The same day, we encountered flyers (all for events occurring in the past) for various religious forums and conferences posted on the outer wall of a hut. One poster advertised a five-day Buddhist conference featuring an area Lama, or priest. Another publicized a week-long Hindu conference involving a reading of the Vedas and the Puranas, important Hindu texts, and a discussion of Hindu culture and values. This indicated to me that several religions were tolerated. After speaking to several people in the camps, I developed a more nuanced view of tolerance and tension among the distinct religious communities.

We interviewed a Hindu priest (Prakash), a Buddhist priest (Rajman), a Christian pastor (Deu), a 40-year-old Christian man (Chandra), a 32-year-old Christian woman (Surjana), and a 19-year-old Hindu man (Madan). Some of them stressed the harmonious nature of relations in the camp, while others highlighted tensions between Christianity and other religions.

Prakash, the Hindu priest, did not offer much information regarding his relationship with other religions. He said that he has good relationships with other religious figures in the camps, and believes that it is good to learn about different religions. Although different religions have different practices, he noted that all share the same core values and principles.

Rajman, the Buddhist Lama, spoke more about how Buddhists in general should act toward people of other religions than about his actual relationships with others. He said that a good Buddhist “does not say anything to other religions,” and, “should not harm others,” kill, or, “clash,” and that Buddhists help any creature in need by praying for it.

Deu, the Christian pastor, has friends of all religious background and believes that Christians should love and respect others. He noted that sometimes Hindus and Buddhists “do not like Christians, and dominate them,” which we understood to mean bullying, and shared his observation that some Hindus and Buddhists will not eat the food that Christians have touched—even when their shared caste status would allow them to interact as equals—indicating that there may be discrimination against Christians.

Chandra, a Christian, told us that people in his community do not like Christians because they believe Christianity is the religion adopted by lower-caste members of society. Chandra, who is from a high caste himself, clearly took offense to this, and noted that it is mostly the older people who believe this. Some believe that everyone is equal. When we discussed how he perceives other religions, he said that other religions maintain antiquated practices, adding that Hindus drink alcohol often, which is immoral.

In contrast, 32-year-old Surjana said that she does “not think people take negatively to [her] because [she is] a Christian,” and that, “no one has any objection” to her Christianity. People of different religions and castes live in the camps, she said, and explained that there are around 40 churches in the Beldangi camp (where she lives), as well as many Buddhist monasteries, and Hindu and Kirat temples. She pointed out that everyone lives together irrespective of religion and without discrimination. Since her conversion in 1998, she has followed the Bible, which tells her that she should have good relationships with her neighbors. She invites neighbors, both Christian and of other faiths, to join her family’s Christmas celebration, but doesn’t accept her non-Christian neighbors’ invitations to their religious festivals. As she explains, “what they celebrate is false…I do not hate them, but I feel they are on the wrong path.” Many of the Christian Bhutanese refugees share similar opinions about followers of non-Christian religions, believing that Christianity is the correct religion to follow.

Madan, the nineteen-year-old Hindu male, explained that he does not care about religion or caste: “We are all the same blood, and we all eat the same food…there should be no torture over religion.” Denying that Hindus segregate themselves from others, he said, “Different people have different views; sometimes other people think that Hindus are holy, and that they only eat and drink in their own homes. Normally it is not like that and people do not take negatively to Hindus.” Ultimately, he emphasized that “whether you are good or bad to others depends on yourself more than on your religion.” However, he admitted that his Christian and Hindu friends sometimes argue among themselves about their religious differences.

One common belief, expressed by both Chandra and Deu, is that Christians are discriminated against by members of other religions. As Chandra explained, this could be because some Christianity is viewed as a low-caste religion. However, this overlooks the fact that Christian Bhutanese refugees don’t acknowledge the validity of any other religion besides Christianity, though the Hindus or Buddhists we spoke to didn’t mention this explicitly. Interestingly, the Hindus and Buddhists we spoke to didn’t talk about any ten-
sions between members of their religious groups and Christians. And some Christians like Surjana also thought that good relations existed among the various religious groups. All valued getting along with others even if it wasn’t happening—community trumped religious differences.

Conversion to Christianity
Many of the Christians in the camps converted after leaving Bhutan. Every convert we spoke to emphasized positive life changes after conversion, including improvements to their social and economic well-being, physical health, relationships, and vitality in old age.

For Surjana, who converted to Christianity after marrying into a Christian household, the most significant change she experienced was an economic benefit. The “little income” she and her husband earned from teaching was enough to provide for their household needs and to send their children to school. She also prefers the religious practices of Christianity, noting that as a Hindu, she was into worldly things, and would worship stones and logs when she went to temple. Now that she is Christian, she knows the true life is with God only, which has given her “eternal satisfaction.” Parul, a 40-year-old man who converted to Christianity in 2007, also claimed the achievement of “eternal satisfaction” as an exclusive benefit of Christianity.

Deu credited Christianity with improvements in his health. Hospitalized frequently as a young man for a lung condition, Deu was told he had only three months to live. In the hospital, his uncle told him, “God still loves you,” assured him that God could save him from death, and gave him a copy of the Bible. Deu started reading and, as he put it, “began to learn how God could protect him and bring life to him.” He was baptized and medical check-ups revealed improvement. After this experience, and with the support of his friends, Deu took a three-year course in theology, became a pastor, and still lives in Beldangi I. Another refugee told us that her parents converted to Christianity after all the shamans had been resettled, and noted that no one in the family has been sick since, attributing it to prayer. Deu and Parul described their religious conversions in terms of the “bad habits” they gave up, specifically drugs and alcohol, forbidden substances among the Christians in the Bhutanese refugee camps. In the Christianity practiced in the camps, alcohol is forbidden, which likely does lead to improved health and economic well-being for those who had been inclined towards alcohol abuse.

Surjana, like many new converts, encouraged her relatives to convert to
Christianity. Her father had died before she was married, but her two brothers and her mother converted. We were told that when a child converts without his or her parents, tensions can sometimes arise between the parents and the son or daughter who converted. However, the refugees we interviewed maintained good relations with their parents after converting to Christianity.

Refugees who have converted to Christianity explain their experience of practicing and believing in Christianity as the sole reason for dramatic improvements in their lives. “Jesus is alive and comes into my life and changes me,” Parul said when we asked how Christianity affected his life. Similarly, Surjana credited the fact that she now follows God for the change in her life.

Religion and the Young Generation
The younger generation raised and educated in the camps demonstrated more tolerant attitudes toward diversity of belief. Those with whom we spoke adhered less to traditional cultural, religious, and caste systems, and more to shared values of community and mutual respect.

Madan, the young Hindu man, said the reason they are more accepting is because younger people are more educated than the older people; most of the children attended school in the camps, while most of the older refugees didn’t attend school in Bhutan. Religion doesn’t play a part in the school day, according to a teacher we spoke to, who told us that the schools organize students into houses. Houses elect house captains and school captains—without thought given to religion, helping students create relationships with people based on non-religious connections. Other conversations with 18-to-20-year-olds involved with the Bhutanese Refugee Children’s Forum or the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum highlighted that something similar was going on in these organizations.

In the home, the situation may be different. When speaking with Surjana, who is a parent as well as a Christian, she said that she raises her children in a “Christian Biblical environment,” and her children attend fellowship and Sunday school every week. Other Christian parents told us of scheduled times during the week when they would practice their religion and attend related activities. Hindus discussed only their individual worship and nothing of teaching the religion to their children. It seemed to be expected that the children would continue the practice of religion that their families had practiced for generations, which could be why conversion to Christianity was such a surprise to parents.

Despite the presence of so many religious institutions and the widespread practice of a variety of religious beliefs, some people mentioned an overall decline in the religiosity of the younger generation. The Hindu priest suggested this might be because the younger generation is in good health and therefore does not need to go to the temple for worship. One Hindu woman connected the decline to resettlement, noting that she detected a change in people’s attitudes four or five years ago. Maybe, she mused, because there is more tolerance in America, people have changed how they act in the camps.

Conclusion
In interviews, Bhutanese refugees of all religious persuasions openly expressed their religious beliefs to our group, demonstrating to me that despite what non-followers of a particular faith might think or say, followers of a religion do not worry about being stigmatized based on their faith. Furthermore, the prevalence of non-religious organizations in the camps provides many opportunities for people of all faiths to work together towards common goals, whether they be in school or in community endeavors. These experiences provide models of how individuals can maintain their religious identity without separating themselves from others. 📚

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There’s some variety in the bamboo huts in Bhutanese refugee camps. One may be dilapidated, while the hut next door has brightly painted bamboo paneling and cloth curtains hanging in its cutout windows, showing that these are more than simply shelters, but also homes. Despite any differences in decoration, all huts come in one of only two sizes—small and large—a mandate from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The small hut can, and often does, accommodate a family of up to eight, while the relatively larger hut can house a family of sixteen. When children grow up, marry, and start families of their own, they live in the husband’s home with his parents and other family members, per Bhutanese (and Nepali) tradition that has persisted despite the upheaval that comes with displacement. Bhutanese refugees have maintained the importance of extended family. Even in the camps, family cycles continue, as people get married and hundreds of children are born every year.

I’m interested in childhood and children’s changing roles in the family, specifically how displacement has changed expectations of and relationships between generations. Within Bhutanese refugee families, older and younger generations have had and are having very different childhood ex-
experiences. In the life story interviews our research team conducted, we encouraged people to discuss their pasts, presents, and futures, revealing some of these differences. These interviews revealed how Bhutanese refugees observe early life experiences and understand them as influences in their own lives and in their children’s lives, both now and in the future.

We asked older refugees to examine their own past experiences in Bhutan and provide observations about their own children and grandchildren who live in the camps. They mentioned that new opportunities for children, most notably education, are being provided by international aid organizations, and this is both changing how members of the older generation view their own childhood experiences and shaping their expectations for the younger generation, particularly with resettlement approaching. Though changing responsibilities, opportunities, and prospects for the future have increased children’s autonomy, Bhutanese refugees in the camps continue to value family.

Remembrances of Bhutan
Beginning by asking the refugees to map and describe their first homes led many of our interviews to start on an emotional note. Some people became excited as they drew and explained their maps while others fell into contemplative silence. For those old enough to remember Bhutan, their memories were generally laden with feelings of nostalgia and loss. While they remembered having so much, they also recounted the struggles of having many childhood responsibilities, which often meant little personal opportunity in Bhutan.

73-year-old Dipendra at first thought that he couldn’t remember his childhood. When invited to describe his life transitions, he told us that he attended school until he was 21 and that his student life was his “golden life.” Dipendra fondly remembered this time, saying that he enjoyed playing with friends and playing in the forest. Now, despite having three family members who have already resettled to the United States, Dipendra and the rest of his family are continuing their efforts to repatriate to Bhutan. He said this was his only hope; though he does not care about his current life, he cares deeply about negotiating repatriation to Bhutan.

Dipendra’s deep nostalgia for and dedication to Bhutan are rooted in the memory of his childhood experiences. While Dipendra’s story is unique, I found that older Bhutanese refugees in general expressed their longing for Bhutan by focusing on past prosperity and happiness, often from their childhoods. The older refugees we spoke to were particularly nostalgic, and more so than any others groups would explicitly say that they want to return home to Bhutan.

Roles of Children: Caretaking and Education
Aadesh, a 46-year-old camp mediator, expressed sadness in recounting the details of his family’s prosperity during his childhood in Bhutan. Explaining the components of the map we had asked him to draw, Aadesh identified his family, his neighbors, house, and field of cows. Remembering these things from Bhutan, he said, made him cry. He continued, noting that his family’s former assets included plentiful land, cornfields, orange trees, cows, and cardamom plants that they sold for income. As a child, Aadesh enjoyed going to school and playing with his many friends, but he also had responsibilities. He contrasted his fond memories of his early life with a more difficult period that came later, after both of his parents got sick and his older brothers had moved away to work and then got “married and separated from the family.” At 15, Aadesh had to leave school to take care of his family and began a job at a local brick factory that he held for the next six or seven years. “If my brothers were there…” Aadesh regrettfully repeated many times.

Many other Bhutanese refugees we interviewed recounted their childhood responsibilities to their parents, responsibilities that restricted early opportunities to pursue education and shaped their future roles in the family. Gender played a role in what was expected of them. While Aadesh was required to provide for his family through work outside the home, 48-year-old Susmita contributed through what she called “home and family responsibilities.” Aadesh was forced to leave school to care for his sick parents; Susmita never had the opportunity to go to school because it was traditional for sons, but not daughters, to attend.

Gender and family circumstances weren’t the only obstacles to education; government regulations and logistical constraints also prevented children from attending school. For example, Nayan, a 43-year-old woman, said the long distance to even the nearest school contributed to her parents’ decision not to enroll her in school.

Bhutanese refugees described certain aspects of their young lives not only as things they left behind in Bhutan, but also as experiences that continue to affect them in the camps...
Residual Impact of Childhood Experiences

Most people described their lives in Bhutan and in Nepal as completely separate experiences. Living in a new country signifies a new stage in life: Bhutan is the past, Nepal is the present, the resettlement country, perhaps the United States, is the future. However, Bhutanese refugees described certain aspects of their young lives not only as things they left behind in Bhutan, but also as experiences that continue to affect them in the camps and that will have an impact on their future, providing continuity to these disjointed experiences. Particularly, their experiences of arranged marriages as children and their education in Bhutan have affected their later lives, revealing the influence of parental authority, and affecting how they respond to new opportunities both personally and for their children and grandchildren.

Education

50-year-old Suresh works in the Sanischare camp as a tailor. He thinks that this will continue to be a good profession once he’s resettled—lacking formal education won’t get in the way of his career success. He explained, “In the period [I] grew up, people could survive without an education by tending the field, and life was much more easy-going.” Education is much more important in the camps and Suresh laments that he didn’t attend school. He views his lack of education as contributing to his label as a refugee. It motivates him to seek education for his children in the United States, where he will no longer be a refugee and hopefully no longer live like one.

Suresh’s views show how highly the older generation of Bhutanese refugees now value education. Many interviewees noted the increased availability of education in the camps, highlighting this as a positive change from their lives in Bhutan. According to Father Paramasivam Amalraj, the Field Director of Caritas Nepal, the Bhutanese refugee education program was created “for, by, and of” the refugees. He noted the “initiative” that the refugees took in creating and promoting educational opportunities for younger generations in the Nepali camps.

Our interviews suggest that the younger generation attaining higher levels of education as refugees has had an ongoing impact on the older generations, who confront residual effects of not having attended school. Parents and grandparents in the camps often express regret for their lack of education and note its importance, especially post-resettlement, shaping their hopes and expectations for their children.
Arranged Marriage

Susmita’s parents decided that she would marry at 11. This “was a normal tradition... the children had no choice,” she explained, and after a difficult two-year adjustment, Susmita came to understand that her husband’s house was her house too. Respecting tradition, she became “happy and adjusted.”

43-year-old Nayan was 18 when she got married to a man her parents selected for her, and described her difficult adjustment to living as a wife and moving away from her family as a key transition in her life. Because she has five daughters, and because she is a mother to so many children and is one (the first) of two wives, camp administrators consider her a “vulnerable woman,” a designation that affords her special assistance such as supplementary job training. She contrasted her many childhood responsibilities, including working in the fields and caring for her parents, to her daughters having only to attend school. She hopes that they’ll get married in the United States, perhaps to members of a higher caste.

As Nayan’s and Susmita’s stories show, early arranged marriages were not just an important event in childhood or youth in Bhutan, but also a determining factor in the course of the rest of Bhutanese refugees’ lives. Bhutanese arranged marriages were based on ethnic and family ties and were common until the late twentieth century. As both men and women explained to us, parents had full authority in determining these marriages. Just as children’s roles as caretakers showed their responsibility to their parents, children’s obedience in arranged marriages highlighted parental authority in the household.

Nayan’s hopes about her own daughters’ marriages showed that the older generation still values marriage today. Nayan and other parents we spoke to acknowledged that “love marriages” are most common today, and support marriage for the benefits it may bring to their families in the future. Parents now mostly expect “love marriages,” which exclude them from the decision-making. This reveals an overall shift in the way older generations understand children’s responsibilities in the family. Despite these changes, older generations still recognize that decisions made as a child about things like marriage and education will have long-term effects. Children, however, experience these changes and expectations differently.

Children’s Autonomy in Nepal

UNHCR considers those under 18 to be children; 18-to-25-year-olds are considered youth. In fact, UNHCR-run community groups are divided along these age lines, with the Bhutanese Refugee Children’s Forum serving children, and the Youth Friendly Center (YFC) serving refugee youth. The youths we interviewed talked mostly about their childhood experiences—unsurprisingly, as childhood accounted for the majority of their lives so far. They also spoke of their hopes for the future, most often in countries of resettlement. Their interviews showed that Bhutanese refugee children and youth are diverging from the traditional roles the older generation assumed, attributable to increased education, elopement, and religious conversion. While children and youth are autonomously making more of their own decisions, they’re still managing to maintain positive relationships with their parents.

In our interview, 22-year-old Koushila, who works at BRWF, constantly spoke of her love for school and learning. She told us that her father wanted her to be a graduate student someday, but she instead eloped because she and her husband worried that they would be separated during resettlement. Although she says that she is happy in her marriage, she remarked that she sometimes feels bad because, as a mother, she can’t spend time freely with her friends and enjoy her usual activities. Noting her marriage as the turning point in her life, Koushila explained that she has not been able to do much to accomplish her father’s dream of her becoming a graduate student now that she is a wife. While she tries to maintain independence outside of the home through work, her husband wants her to perform the traditional role of a wife and mother.

Education

While many parents like Koushila’s father encourage their children to pursue schooling because the opportunity was unavailable to them and they understand its future benefits, disparity in education levels can create some generational tension. Some youth we interviewed expressed disagreement with their parents’ traditional views toward caste, for example, and also explained their dreams for attaining higher-level jobs in resettlement. Education in the camps helps create a culture of socially progressive young people and gives them more independence outside of the family structure, as higher education is now a possibility. In fact, the younger generations of Bhutanese interviewees attribute their own divergence
from some traditional roles to their increased education. Although education causes a separation from traditional values and responsibilities, it can still preserve certain traditional roles. Parents like Koushila’s father have gained an appreciation for education, and encourage their children to pursue the opportunities they did not have. Therefore, as most parents promote schooling, education does not create a complete disconnect among generations. Koushila’s father expected her to attend school; in such a case, pursuing education reinforces a Bhutanese child’s traditional responsibility to his or her parents.

**Elopement**

Eloping intentionally excludes parents from children’s marriage choices. Though this is completely opposite from traditional arranged marriages, traditional roles in marriages persist, exemplified by Koushila’s husband’s strict expectations for their marriage. Couples who elope still live with the husband’s family, maintaining paternal ties, and children who elope still try to keep relationships with their own parents positive. Koushila did not explain her elopement as disobedience, but rather as a way to preserve her love relationship, which was threatened by resettlement, and emphasized the importance of friends and family in their limited time before resettlement. Although her parents were unhappy at first, Koushila says that they ultimately accepted the marriage and that she still has a good relationship with her father.

**Religious Conversion**

Born Hindu, 19-year-old Damanta explained that “in my heart something happened,” after attending a Christian church service one day. She told us, “My family used to scold me... ‘Don’t go Christian. Why are you Christian?’” They’ve since seen positive changes in her life, including increased obedience, and have accepted her conversion.

Religious conversion is another way to stray from traditional roles. Many Christian converts whom we interviewed adopted their new beliefs against their parents’ wishes, challenging the traditional authority of their Bhutanese parents. However, as Damanta explained, conversion away from the family religion is not an act of rebellion. Despite their religious conversions, she and others like her have maintained positive relations with their families as they’ve also maintained traditional Bhutanese values. In fact, Damanta’s strict religious code enforces traditional Bhutanese values, such as obeying her parents.

**The Overall Family Impact**

Although experiences are changing for younger generations in the camps, children and young adults still maintain many traditional Bhutanese values anchored in family relationships. Older generations form expectations for their children based on their own experiences in Bhutan, and children become more autonomous as they pursue opportunity in the camps. Many of the independent decisions children make are not rebellious, but rather an effort to secure their futures, the same desire that their own parents have for them. Older generations’ traditional upbringings cause them to encourage their children to pursue these new opportunities, particularly for future benefits in resettlement; yet, the extreme independence stemming from education, elopement, and religious conversion does not match up with their expectations. However, as children move toward autonomy, positive relationships with family members still exist. A key requirement of children in Bhutan was to place family members first, and children maintain this responsibility in the camps, even through non-traditional paths. These positive relationships attest to the prevalence of underlying family values in the camps, and hopes for the future.
IN THE SEA OF BAMBOO STRUCTURES that constitute the Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal, people are housed so closely together that inviting a neighbor over for dinner is as simple as shouting from hut to hut. Families even share communal toilets. Within the intimate environment of the camps, a tight-knit community has emerged over the past two decades.

A community implies both similarity among its members and distinction from outsiders, according to A.P. Cohen’s *Symbolic Construction of Community*. Who, then, is included and excluded from the Bhutanese refugee community? As thousands of people resettle and some camps shut down entirely, what holds community together in the camps? What obstacles exist?

**Boundary Dynamics between Refugees and the Host Community**

I went to Nepal with five other students with these questions in mind. I expected to see a strong division between the refugees living inside the camps, and the Nepali citizens living in nearby towns—the “host community.” Each group certainly has reason to be resentful of the other. Nepali citizens have many rights that Bhutanese refugees lack. According to Father Amalraj, Damak field director of Caritas Nepal, “Refugees are like prisoners because they have no citizenship. Everything they receive is measured out and given to them... Refugees can’t legally work elsewhere. To be a refugee is to die a slow death.” One might expect the refugees to envy the freedoms that the Nepali citizens possess. Likewise, the Nepali host community has reason to dislike the Bhutanese

The boundaries of Bhutanese refugee communities are constantly being made and remade by displacement and resettlement.

by NICOLE DANIELS
Despite the great tension that could exist between the two groups, the refugees with whom we spoke did not place emphasis on “insiders” and “outsiders” to the extent that I predicted. Some refugees even marry Nepali citizens. 20-year-old Harihar works with the Youth Friendly Center in the Sanischare camp and plays soccer with men who live outside his camp. He explained, “I have nice friends from the host community.” Other refugees we spoke to mentioned only minor conflict, not hostility, between the two groups.

However, this harmony was not achieved effortlessly. Umesh, a 32-year-old Christian pastor in the Beldangi camp, explained that there was some initial friction with the host community. He told us, “When the camps were first created, the outside people were uncertain of the new refugee strangers. Eventually, the two groups learned to work together. Now the host community and refugee community purchase different goods and resources from one another. For example, the refugees cannot have cows in the camps, so they buy their milk and yogurt from the host community.” Over time, Umesh and other refugees and the host community have developed a mutually beneficial relationship.

Suresh, a 50-year-old man who serves as both a tailor and a shaman in the Sanischare camp, agreed that the relationship between the camp and the outside community is generally good, but also described some points of conflict. He explained, “If the people in the camps are good to the outside community, that attitude [will be reciprocated]. However, if one group is bad, the other will act the same way. People from the camp often drink and bother the host community, leading to quarrels and fights. One person can leave the host community a bad impression of the entire refugee community. However, if the refugees are good, the outside community will treat them well, and vice versa.”

With that, it is apparent that some people see distinctions between refugees and the Nepali citizens, and the two groups do not form a completely united community. Susmita, a 48-year-old woman from the Khudunabari camp who has a leadership position in the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum, noted, “If there is an issue [between the camp and the host community], the camp always invites outside community members to camp meetings” to sort out the problem. Nevertheless, Suresh still believed that a single refugee could negatively influence the host community’s opinion of the entire refugee community. The existence of this attitude implies the refugee community is in a vulnerable position; they cannot afford to damage their reputation in the host community.

The generally supportive relationships between refugees and Nepali citizens that have emerged over time are valuable, as the two groups are able to exchange resources and develop personal relationships. However, although they can live peacefully, they are not unified. The refugees are still to some degree considered a group of outsiders. This distinction reinforces refugees’ longing for Bhutan, the place they identify as their home.

United by Longing

Nostalgia for Bhutan was a recurring theme in our interviews and informal discussions. In a mapping exercise in the Sanischare camp, most people drew
their homes in Bhutan when asked to draw their first home. They included vivid details such as their crops, significant buildings in their community, and neighbors’ homes. Suraj, a 70-year-old man, explained, “When I go to sleep, I still remember the fields, plants, goats, and cattle. Everything I remember is only about Bhutan. Every night when I go to sleep, I go directly to Bhutan.” Our interviewees described good times in Bhutan with their families, and smiled as they recounted fun memories playing outdoor games with childhood friends. After our interviews and group mapping sessions, the refugees often expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to reminisce about their lives in Bhutan.

The shared longing for home in Bhutan provides an important context for understanding community identity in the camp. 46-year-old Asish serves as a community leader in the Camp Mediation Service Center at the Sanischare camp. He explained that many people dealt with the same problem when they first arrived in the camps. In Bhutan, “we left good houses and were frustrated by life in the small, close huts.” Although the people in Asish’s community were unfamiliar at first, they got to know and trust each other. Having shared the profound experience of being uprooted from their homes, the refugees we spoke to almost always pointed to leaving Bhutan as one of their important life transitions, and several yearned to be repatriated. People built off one another’s stories about Bhutan, and this common narrative serves as a unifying point.

Layers of Community Revealed through Camp Consolidation

Some refugees described a strong bond among the neighbors with whom they have lived for nearly 20 years. Chaundra, a 73-year-old man who had just relocated from the Khudunabari camp to Beldangi, explained, “Good neighbors help each other and speak kindly about one another. If neighbors are in trouble or sick, I help them.” Generosity and reciprocity were two themes we heard as people discussed their personal relationships in the camps. They often invite neighbors and friends to share meals together. On holy days and festivals, people dance, eat, and celebrate with one another.

Responses to camp consolidation indicate that some people prioritize these close relationships with neighbors over their identity with the refugee community at large, while others do not. As hundreds of residents depart each week to be resettled, camp populations are shrinking. To address this and to provide for more efficient aid delivery, UNHCR has closed some camps, relocating residents to camps near major highways and aid organizations’ Damak offices.

In response to camp consolidation, some people expressed that they felt greatest solidarity with the residents of their own camp, not the Bhutanese refugee population at large. Susmita expressed her apprehension about relocating to a new camp, her eyes watering and her voice trembling, “I have lived in Khudunabari for 18 years. I am worried about moving to an unknown place with unknown people. The community in Khudunabari is close, but I am uncertain what the new community will be like in the new camp. I worry if there will be the same types of support and closeness. I have not been given information as to where I will be relocated.”

Susmita’s use of the word “unknown” demonstrates that her sense of community is closely linked to the members of her own camp, people she knows well through many years of living close to them. Sharing a common history and heritage with people in the other camps does not ease her anxiety about getting to know a new set of neighbors in a new setting.

Similarly, Bishnu, a 26-year-old woman from Beldangi, made a distinction between the “old” community and “new” community in her camp. The old community included the people who lived in her camp before camp consolidation, while the new community includes refugees from Timai and Goldhap. She explained: “The old community was good and always helpful. They understood my struggles because they knew me since I was a child and helped me in times of need…. People had a mutual understanding. We lived together for 18 to 20 years with no quarrels or fighting.” However, Bishnu said that the new community discriminates against her for being a single mother. For her, community is the bond with neighbors that develops over time. She doesn’t find the same trust and support from others who simply shared the experience of being a refugee.

However, others placed less emphasis on community being tied to personal relationships with the people in their camp. 30-year-old Neha expressed ambivalence about relocating. She had moved from the Timai camp to Beldangi, but did not have strong opinions about the move. Just as Neha relied on her neighbors in Timai, she still depends on her new neighbors in Beldangi to support her when she is sick. She couldn’t produce any comparisons to explain the differences between the two camps, but said, “I do not see a big change from Timai. I feel like I am still in Timai. I was given no trouble from the people in Timai and also no trouble from people in Beldangi.” For her, the physical location and the specific people living around her mattered less, as Neha still found community among other Bhutanese refugees.

Suresh was especially accepting of refugees moving from other camps to
his camp. He explained, “There are empty places in the camp for [the newcomers from Khudunabari]. The camp is about to become a jungle with all the empty places from people who left to resettle. Human beings need to be around other human beings. It is good that other people are coming to fill in the community.” He believed the influx of any Bhutanese refugees would improve his community.

Our research team witnessed extensive welcoming efforts in Beldangi as the first busses of people arrived from Khudunabari. Hundreds of Beldangi residents lined the driveway to watch their new neighbors arrive. When the first bus stopped and its door opened, people began clapping. A band played lively music. People photographed the new arrivals. There was a true sense that attendees embraced the new members of their community, helping them find their new home sites and creating a celebratory atmosphere.

From anxiety to ambivalence to acceptance, these opinions on camp consolidation illuminate the diverse attitudes that Bhutanese refugees have towards other Bhutanese refugees. Some people included the entire Bhutanese refugee population in their definition of community. Others found a stronger sense of community through their neighbors. Regardless of how community is delineated by each individual, all seemed to value community in their lives, suggesting that community is closely linked with identity.

Sense of Belonging through Community Organizations

Numerous organizations exist in the camps to promote community, each funded by various aid organizations and each targeted at different demographics. These organizations range from religious organizations to forums that provide activities and services for children, women, young adults, the elderly, and the disabled. We met many of our interviewees through community organizations in the camps, and it was clear that participants find these programs an important source of community identity.

Damanta, a 19-year-old woman from Sanischare, works with the Bhutanese Refugee Women’s Forum (BRWF). She smiled brightly when she spoke about her involvement with the BRWF, saying, “There was other competition for this opportunity, but I was one of the women selected. My job at the BRWF used to consist of overseeing the library facility. However, the BRWF downsized and no longer needed this position, so I shifted to store keeping. The BRWF is doing good work for the people in the community. They offer social network training, loans, free books to read, and lessons on hand looming.” BRWF creates a sense of autonomy for Damanta and women like her, empowering them to receive other training and employment. That she pointed out that she was selected through a competitive process suggests Damanta has pride in her job.

Refugees also find respect and belonging in elected leadership positions in the camp organizations. Sitting in his office where he presides over disputes brought to him by residents of Sanischare camp, Asish expressed his satisfaction with serving as a mediator in the Community Mediation Service Center. He explained, “From the beginning, I had strong feelings toward social service and helping people with their needs. I have a good relationship with the community and am very social, which made me well liked. I was elected to the position of community mediator by my fellow community members. I have a good relationship with my friends and neighbors and frequently help with their problems, so they like me a lot. There were three to four other candidates for this position, but I was elected.”

Similarly, Susmita grinned widely as she explained her leadership role in Khudunabari’s BRWF. She explained, “I first became involved with the BRWF as a result of a unit election. I had always been nominated and elected by the people of the camps. I don’t know how to write, but my friends said it did not matter and encouraged me by saying they would help me. I can speak, so that’s what’s important. I have many old friends from my first years in the camp and newer
friends from the BRWF. People know my name because I have held positions in committees for so long…. I encourage [women affected by domestic violence] to speak up and explore their emotions because they are often not confident to leave their place in the hut. The women feel very reserved within the hut, so I encourage them to speak up in the community and come join the BRWF.”

Susmita gained a strong sense of community through her involvement with BRWF. Originally, she was unsure if she had an adequate educational background for the work, but she gained confidence as the community supported her and believed in her. She made friendships and connections through her position, strengthening her sense of belonging. Leadership positions in the BRWF create opportunities for women to lead fulfilling lives through inspiring other women, shaping their own identities around this responsibility.

Damanta’s, Asish’s, and Susmita’s accounts demonstrate that not only do individuals value their community, but they also find a niche for themselves through their engagement within the community. The fact that leadership positions in the community organizations are filled by refugees (as opposed to aid workers) provides them with control in an environment where refugees do not get to make many of their own decisions. The camp organizations powerfully illustrate how personal identity can emerge through community.

**Resettlement as an Ongoing Challenge to Community**

Camp consolidation causes changes in refugee communities at the structural level. The resettlement of individual people also causes changes, deeply affecting camp communities. Close friends and family members become separated by continents, creating personal sorrows.

Our team rode a bus that transports refugees from the Beldangi camp to the IOM (International Organization for Migration) office in Damak. This bus ride begins their resettlement process to the U.S. or another distant country. As people got on the correct busses, friends and extended family gathered and said tearful good-byes. Once passengers were seated, people extended their arms out the windows to touch their loved ones crowded outside the busses. Inside the bus, almost everyone was wearing tika, a small clump of rice dyed red, on their foreheads, a Hindu blessing for their safe travels. Several people were misty eyed.

19-year-old Damanta has spent her entire life in her camp and has said goodbye to many significant people in her life there. Her elder siblings and all of her friends moved to the United States during earlier waves of resettlement. Damanta explained that before resettlement began, she “used to like the community in the camp, and it was once a beautiful environment. There were a lot of people around and they would enjoy themselves and have fun. After so many people in the camp resettled, it is empty in the community. …If they were able to create the same environment that the camp used to have and bring back those who have resettled, I would prefer to stay in the camp rather than go to the U.S.” The fact that Damanta wanted her friends and family back in Sanischare and did not want to leave her camp demonstrates a strong attachment to her camp’s community.

On a larger level, entire camps are affected by the loss of individuals to resettlement. When teachers, principals, and classmates leave schools, the children who remain in the camps experience an unstable educational environment. As leaders leave camp committees, difficulties arise for the camp organizations. Resettlement is a never-ending obstacle towards maintaining community. New members from closing camps fill in some of the empty spaces, but as many of the accounts have highlighted, new neighbors cannot always replace the close relationships that have developed over such a long time.

**Significance of Community Identity for Understanding Bhutanese Refugees**

The boundaries of Bhutanese refugee communities are constantly being made and remade by displacement and resettlement. Community begins from the shared experience of expulsion from Bhutan, and then becomes layered with the relationships that emerge among neighbors and participation in community organizations. This entire network is thrown into upheaval by resettlement and camp consolidation.

Comprehending both the sources of and the challenges to community identity is crucial to understanding the Bhutanese refugee population. As they resettle in cities across the U.S. and around the world, they will always retain their identities as Bhutanese refugees. They will lose particular place-based relationships and roles from which they have drawn another sense of identity, but they won’t lose their experiences. They might draw from those experiences to guide them to meaningful relationships and roles as they establish themselves in communities in their new homes.
IRAQI REFUGEES STARTED ARRIVING in Cairo, Egypt, in 2003, following that year’s invasion of their country by a coalition of armies led by the United States. Most of the 45,000 Iraqi refugees now living in Cairo came in 2006 and 2007, having fled the sectarian violence caused by the invasion. The UNHCR estimates that 4.7 million Iraqis were displaced in the conflict, 2.7 million of whom are internally displaced, and 2 million outside Iraq’s borders. To put this in context, it’s the largest flow of refugees from any country in the Middle East since the 1948 creation of Israel.

Iraq’s last 30 years have been turbulent. From 1980-1988, Iraq and Iran were at war. In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait; by January 1991, a U.S.-led coalition had repelled the invading forces. The rest of the decade was marked by a United Nations arms embargo and economic sanctions; a rebellion by Kurds and Shi’a that was met with a violent government crackdown; and the flight of many Kurds and Shi’a. After coalition forces invaded Iraq in 2003, overthrew the Ba’ath regime, and deposed Saddam Hussein, they helped set up a weak and ineffective transitional government led by the Shi’a. Rather than ensuring a smooth transfer of power, looting, violence, and chaos erupted. Sectarian violence engulfed the nation as militant campaigns against the current regime, the previous regime, the United States, the supporters of Saddam, the Sunnis, and the Shi’a swept the nation.

Large numbers of Iraqi refugees who fled the sectarian violence now live in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, and smaller numbers in Iran and Turkey. They can’t return to Iraq. Egypt, a country of 80 million resi-
dents, hosts the fifth largest urban refugee population in the world, with Sudanese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali refugees joining Iraqis. Most of these refugees live in Cairo, one of the largest and most densely packed cities in the world with a population of nearly 20,000,000.

Stipends and aid are available to Iraqi refugees in Egypt, but they have to seek it out themselves. Since they live all over Cairo rather than in camps, Iraqi refugees are separated from the UNHCR and other organizations charged with helping them. Moreover, the Egyptian government does not grant refugees permanent residency, so Iraqis are not legally allowed to work or enroll their children in the public education system. They often rely on savings and remittances to ensure the education of their children, which must come from private schools in the area.

Financial assistance is limited, temporary, and available only to the most vulnerable of refugees—those with debilitating medical conditions, single mothers, victims of violence or torture, or minors aged 16-18. Funding is a mere 150-165 Egyptian pounds per month—a little less than $30. The Egyptian government neither supports the refugee population nor particularly condones the presence of aid organizations, which have been subject to increased scrutiny and closures since the revolution. The situation of Iraqi refugees in Egypt is further complicated by the fact that they’re not permitted to work legally. Many Iraqis have college degrees and lived middle and upper middle class existences, working in professions like law, dentistry, and science. Transitioning to refugee life in Egypt has been particularly difficult. Because their savings are finite, and because assistance is limited, many refugees are in extremely precarious financial situations, and they’re emotionally distraught about it. Living in cramped conditions in an increasingly more unstable country (gang activity, home invasions, and sexual assaults are on the rise) has profoundly affected their halanufsia, or psychological well-being.

The prospect of resettlement offers a glimmer of hope. However, it remains a far off dream for the vast majority of refugees, with only 500 of the 70,000 Iraqi refugees living in Egypt being resettled to the United States in 2011. The essays we wrote seek to provide a picture of just how extensively displacement has affected the lives of Iraqi refugees in Cairo. The length of their stay in Egypt is now surpassing six years for most, and funds are running low. An unacceptable degree of political silence surrounds their situation, and to repeat a question asked by the refugees we interviewed, when will they find a place of peace and rest?

Currently, there are some

45,000 Iraqis living in Cairo, Egypt.

2,000,000 Iraqis have fled their country because of violence.

500 were resettled in the United States in 2011.
RESETTLEMENT

To what degree do refugees build their lives and plan for the future based on the possibility of resettlement?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has identified three possible solutions to the problems of forced migration. The first, repatriation to the refugee’s country of origin, is often impossible. The native country might be too unstable on account of persisting security issues, often related to the issues that sparked the refugee’s displacement. The second solution, local integration in the country of displacement, is made difficult by fraught political relations and cultural tensions between refugees and locals. The third solution, resettlement to a third country, allows refugees to plant new roots for themselves and their families. Without question, resettlement was discussed most often in our research and interviews with Iraqi refugees living in Cairo, though they talked about the other two options.

Only about one percent of the 15 million refugees in the world will ever be resettled. How do refugees’ expectations of resettlement compare to the realistic likelihood of resettlement? To what degree do refugees build their lives and plan their future based on the possibility of resettlement? I am particularly interested in examining the expectations of Iraqi refugees in Cairo given their unique backgrounds and the particular legal barriers that they face living in Egypt. As mandated by Egyptian law, Iraqi refugees are unable to work legally or send their children to public schools. Some pay for private education while earning little to no regular income. Given the realistic impossibility of building a life in Egypt, these refugees’ expectations have shifted towards resettlement. While the nature of expectations ranged between individuals—some embedded in practicalities, others in aspirations—the common content involved resettlement.

by JULIE STEFANICH
In considering the expectations of Iraqi refugees, it is important to note their extensive educational and professional backgrounds. These backgrounds are an integral part of Iraqi identity and drive their expectations of the future, as their hopes are embedded in the possibility of continuing education or furthering professional careers. Without resettlement, would they lose their professional futures? How could an individual trained as an engineer cope with the reality of working as an unskilled laborer without resettlement? It is not to say that refugees would be guaranteed flourishing futures upon resettlement, but with a new place to live comes new opportunities and newfound hope.

Reflecting upon our time with the Iraqis in Egypt, it became clear that the desire for stability and hope for educational and professional futures, in particular for children, drove their need for resettlement. Given their investments of time, money, and energy into education and professional careers, Iraqis wanted the opportunity to work legally and to continue to develop their professional skills. This desire carried over to their children as well, as parents hoped that their children would receive the same educational opportunities that they had in Iraq. Parents complained about both the flawed educational system in Egypt and the lack of a professional future, as dictated by Egyptian law. A sense of anxiety over the educational and professional policies and a spirit that the children are the future stood out among many individual stories and expressions of expectations for the future (in either Egypt or a new resettlement country).

At age 19, Jamal was the youngest of our interviewees and one of the most intriguing Iraqis we met during our time in Egypt. During our first conversation with him, he spoke of his good fortune: his family was resettling in the United States in four months. He seemed extremely motivated to seize this opportunity, for he had an elaborate plan to attend college and law school and to one day return to Cairo to help refugees like himself. Though he was passionate and driven, an overwhelming sense of anxiety emerged as our conversation went on. His speech, previously propelling the discussion at a fast rate, as though he couldn’t keep up with his own thoughts and plans for the future, began to slow. Just as I noticed this, he turned to me and quietly admitted, “This is just what I hope.”

And so, his plan shifted from practical to aspirational, and Jamal himself was keenly aware of this. Here, in merely a few words, the power of hope became clear as Jamal validated one notion that had been driving my curiosity about these expectations: Jamal lacked a strong sense of assurance of his future, and had turned to hope as a coping mechanism. It was as though this hope was the one thing that he had to hold on to, something to focus on and maintain faith in, in order to avoid true recognition or acceptance of his harsh reality.

A few days later, we met Jamal for a formal interview. He reflected upon his childhood and told us that his first memories were rooted in the war. He spoke of his own kidnapping and his family’s move to Egypt to escape from the sectarian violence in Iraq. In his eyes, that was when he lost his future. As we struggled to understand why, he told us that there was not so much to explain. Schools in Egypt were just too expensive and the possibility of continuing school was out of the question. Of course, the question that followed was how would he have a good future.

The answer was simple: resettlement. Both Jamal and his sister have stopped attending school, as they plan to continue their education after they are resettled. This choice to stop attending school indicates that Jamal and his family expected that resettlement would occur. Jamal was focused on the future, describing his personal state of happiness as “when my future is good; when I catch future—when I go to the US.” He believed that

The flags of nations around the world line Kasr El Nil Bridge in the heart of Cairo and stand as a constant reminder of resettlement to the Iraqi refugees who hope to call another country home.
his life had not begun yet, that it would truly start after resettlement, after he was given the opportunity to go to school and make something of himself. Jamal did not talk about his life after resettlement conditionally because he truly believed that resettlement would happen. Soon.

Marwa demonstrated the powerful desire for resettlement in the name of one’s children, as she hoped for stability and a future not only for herself, but for her children, too. Marwa first illuminated the nature of Egypt’s instability, comparing it to that of Iraq. In Iraq, sectarian violence was a major source of immediate danger, while the instability in Egypt is different. Marwa does not feel safe in Egypt because she has “no job or money and depend[s] on a lot of people.” She sought out resettlement as an escape from this dangerous dependency, because when she is resettled, she will have the right to work. With this right will come freedom and independence for Marwa, since she will be capable of providing a stable life for herself and her children. To her, stability means going “to a state where I don’t think about moving from one country to another anymore.” She wants to live in peace—without fear, threats, or dependency.

Marwa’s desire for and pursuit of resettlement is driven not only by fear for herself, but for her children. Speaking about them, she remarked, “I want them to live in peace and in their names I want resettlement.” In this simple statement she made two key points: one about the importance of her children’s futures and the other linking their future with resettlement. Marwa relied on her children and their futures for her own sense of well-being to provide motivation to seek out resettlement and to bring her case to the IOM. Along with many other Iraqi refugees, Marwa is currently waiting on her security clearance. She articulated that with resettlement, she will find a resulting sense of stability for herself and her family.

As exemplified by Marwa, the interviewees were hoping for and counting on stability in order to carry out their future plans. This notion came out rather organically during the interviews, as the refugees would discuss life in Iraq and the lack of security and services there in recent years. They sought out stability to further their other goals. Stability itself wasn’t talked about as a plan or aspiration for the future, but rather as a precursor for the achievement of other goals.

While our team was in Cairo for only four weeks, our unique opportunity to examine the refugee experience from various angles expanded our view of the particular sources of the refugees’ expectations. After further investigation, it became clear that Cairo inhibits the development of the stability that the refugees yearned for. A lack of stability in the professional, educational, and medical sectors of refugee life in Cairo drives them to hope to leave Egypt for good. In an effort to manage and process the reality of the instability in Cairo, some refugees focused on resettlement, constantly hoping and planning for it.

Though perceptions of the future are shaped by individual experience, it seems that the Egyptian government’s care for and treatment of refugees, on a broad scale, consistently fosters the hope of resettlement. Egyptian law prohibits refugees from working. While some do find work illegally, an overall sense of idleness pervades refugee life. Those who find work are in a position to be taken advantage of by their employers, given the refugees’ lack of legal rights. They may be severely underpaid or mistreated, in some cases working for a salary less than commuting costs or working for weeks only to be abandoned by their employer without payment.

And perhaps the harshest reality of this issue is that the work that the Iraqis in Cairo are able to find is typically remarkably below their professional caliber, given their strong backgrounds. Many refugees are unable to accept this reality and seek out work in their respective fields upon arrival. Many said that they continually sought out work and were ultimately unsuccessful. In short, Iraqis in Cairo either constantly tried to find jobs in their previous lines of work only to recognize that this was not quite possible and accepted work in lower level fields, or they were idle, given the difficulty of finding even lower level jobs.

Sayid hopes to restart his career in the tourism industry after he resettles. If he and his wife can both find jobs in Canada and if his children can return to school, he asked, "what more could a person want?"

Many refugees living in Cairo harbor the notion that the beginning or progression of life is contingent upon resettlement.
Conceive of the idleness that would emerge in such a bleak professional environment. Individuals who once worked in high power governmental positions or as well-established engineers have begun spending time at home in place of building those careers. In one sense, the extensive development of hopes is inevitable, given the dramatic professional shifts and the resulting self-reflection and planning for a new future. The recognition of the lack of work, particularly the lack of a future working in Egypt, often leads to the development of hopes and expectations of building an educational and professional career upon resettlement. The connection between the lack of work and the lack of a future in Egypt fosters a hope, even a need, to resettle in order to develop a sense of fulfillment in this new life since their displacement from Iraq.

In particular, the educational realities for refugees cultivates elaborate hopes and expectations of resettlement as a means for coping with the oppressive environment. In Egypt, Iraqis can’t attend public schools, and thus are bound to pay for private school. Some also enroll their children in private tutoring lessons to help their children achieve educational expectations. Their money often runs out before their children graduate from the equivalent of high school. Families are also unable to gather the funds to pay for higher education, understandably so, given the lack of any consistent income for Iraqi refugees in Egypt. Some Iraqis who hope to be resettled are unwilling to send their children to college in Egypt, for they believe that an Egyptian degree will not be respected in the West. In these different ways, families cope with the educational realities by counting and planning on resettlement, and in doing so, avoid the recognition of the possibility of their children’s loss of educational futures.

Consider Alaa and his wife, who spoke of their children throughout their interview. In their eyes, if there is stability, they will find work and guarantee a future for their children. In America, their children will want “to set a footing where they stand and that they want to find stability.” They hope that their children will earn a degree in the West, a degree more reputable than one from an Arab country. An ideal solution would be resettlement. In fact, it is their only solution. They expect to resettle, and have even set up a sponsor and have gone through many medical and security checks. They are waiting only for a telephone call. It is clear how important resettlement is to this couple, and how their expectations are motivated by their plans and hopes for their children.

The nature of the medical system and the medical care that is available to refugees also has a detrimental effect on their hopes and expectations of resettlement. Through their experiences with aid organizations in Egypt, refugees are exposed to the realities of medical care and treatment in Egypt as compared to that of resettlement countries. This knowledge, in addition to informa-
tion gathered from resettled friends and families, leaves refugees hoping for resettlement in desperation for better medical treatment. After all, how could they accept worse conditions and treatment given the knowledge that better treatment is available abroad? This leaves refugees holding on to the hopes of resettlement, unwilling to accept futures of worse medical treatment for themselves and their children.

One individual we interviewed, Sayid, demonstrated how this issue, as well as those previously mentioned, fostered the expectation of resettlement that is so common among Iraqis in Egypt. He discussed resettlement as though it was a sure bet in the near future. One of his children needs ear surgery, yet Sayid is waiting until they are resettled, because he has heard that the medical conditions are better in Canada. He has no job in Egypt, but has faith that he will be able to return to work in his tourism industry upon resettling in Canada for, “there is better education and employment there.” If both he and his wife are working and the children are in school, he wonders, “what more could a person want?”

Sayid and many other individuals we interviewed encapsulated that refugees in Egypt harbor the notion that the beginning or progression of life is contingent upon resettlement. As aid agencies provide only short-term assistance, refugees develop a strong sense that Egypt is merely an interim destination. The hope of resettlement is always present. Many Iraqis perceive Egypt in this way and put their lives on hold as they wait for a new place to call home in which to continue building their lives. In some sense, Cairo is merely a stop along their journey. Iraqis living in Egypt is not a durable solution.

The reality is that a great portion of these refugees’ lives will pass during this interim, and that is time that they cannot get back. It would be ideal to think that life really does pause during displacement, that the time that passes before a durable solution is found does not take away years from the lives of these refugees. But that, unfortunately, is not the case. It is unknown how long it will take for these refugees to find a place, in their words, of “peace and rest.”

Considering the durable solutions laid out by the UNHCR, resettlement seems like the best possibility for these refugees. Many articulated that they do not wish to return home, to return to what Iraq has become. Issues of services and security destroyed what was once the high standard of living in Iraq and eliminated the possibility of living peacefully there. Many Iraqi refugees have relinquished the hope that they will return home to Iraq. Another option, local integration, is not feasible for these refugees who face discrimination or feelings of animosity within the Egyptian community. This even applies to day-to-day encounters between the two groups, as many Iraqis made it clear that they do not trust Egyptians or accept their distinct cultural practices. The Egyptian government restricts their professional and educational development and has not made an effort to integrate refugees.

Resettlement seems as though it might solve many of the refugees’ problems with stability, professional development, and education. But what the individuals often fail to realize is that strict security clearances have made the resettlement process almost unattainable. Resettlement is not a realistic possibility for many Iraqi refugees. It is conceivable that these refugees are unable to expect anything other than resettlement: for in accepting a life without resettlement, one would be forced to face the daunting question of how they, or their children, will ever have a future. And so they cling to an ever faint hope.
THE INTERNATIONAL STATE SYSTEM functions because there are clear definitions of state sovereignty, citizenship, and political belonging. Being a citizen means certain rights and duties. Citizenship offers protection and political identity that many people may take for granted. When countries can’t provide protection, citizenship and political identity take on different meanings, particularly for refugees, who, having fled their countries, are left outside the state system.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, many Iraqis were forced to flee their country to escape growing violence. As they’ve sought asylum in neighboring states, their experiences of displacement raise important questions about the nature of citizenship and political identity.

I’m interested in what it means to be a citizen of one country forced to live in another due to violence and fear of persecution. The Iraqi refugees in Cairo, Egypt, with whom we spoke enjoy neither the benefits of citizenship—namely, protection—nor the sense of political identity they had in Iraq.

Having fled to Egypt to escape the conditions in Iraq, many Iraqi refugees initially regained some sense of security and safety. These feelings were temporary as they soon realized that this protection alone was not enough. Because they have few rights—most notably, the right to work or go to school—living as refugees in Egypt, their existence is most precarious. Securing a livelihood is an enormous challenge. As the Iraqi refugee displacement situation grows more protracted, they face growing daily challenges to their very survival.

Although these refugees are Iraqi citizens, Iraq is unable to provide the protection they need. Although they have protection in Egypt, they are unable to become a part of Egyptian society because of anti-integration policies. The Iraqi refugees we interviewed want to become citizens of a country that will ensure their well-being, safety, and the futures of their families—citizens of a country where they can fully belong. Third-country resettlement looks like the answer for many Iraqi refugees, as it will allow them to regain political membership in a state (with the rights and protection that this affords) and finally provide them with what so many of us

by ESTHER KIM
take for granted—the simultaneous protection and freedom that citizenship and political identity can provide.

**Iraq**

“After the war in 2003, the country was destroyed. Every day, there were explosions and murder. I felt that it [Iraq] wasn’t my own country…in everything,” explained Nida, a 39-year-old mother of three. She continued, “there was no safety, and security was the most important thing. I was afraid for my husband and for my children to go to school. If you lose safety and security, you lose everything.”

47-year-old Assmaa, who is also a mother, expressed a similar sentiment: her Iraqi citizenship does not provide her with what she needs. “I hate it. I’m really tired. There is no comfort. Not even one percent safety for my children.” While she’s given up on her Iraqi citizenship, she still considers the Iraqi people to be her family, “a dysfunctional family scattered everywhere.” But this shared sense of identity and kinship with fellow Iraqis is not enough. Assmaa “want[s] to resettle and get citizenship” and belong once again to a state so that she can “live in peace—without fear, worry, or threats.”

Eman, a 45-year-old mother of three, still feels like an Iraqi citizen, even if the Iraqi government is responsible for what happened to her and her family. For Eman, it is because the people she loves are there, she went to school there, and her childhood took place in Iraq—what seemed to me to be a nostalgic sense of belonging. She still wants to resettle to a Western country because she doesn’t think conditions in Iraq are going to improve. Because she cannot return and because Egypt does not provide Iraqis like her with legitimate rights and protections, she wants to resettle to ensure the future and security of her family.

There is an overwhelming acknowledgement by the Iraqi refugees that they cannot return to Iraq. Nora, a mother of three in her mid-fifties, explained that she “still loves the country, but can’t go back because the government in Iraq and the situation there is very bad.” We asked the women at one focus group we conducted to draw the first home they remember. Instead of drawing houses, most drew symbols of the Iraqi state. They drew a map of Iraq, the Iraqi flag, and palm trees, which they said represented Iraq—in short, they identified their homes as the country of Iraq. Their deep sense of Iraqi identity and longing to return to Iraq became very clear. Unfortunately, they are longing for an Iraq that no longer exists. Iraqi refugees must turn elsewhere to reestablish a sense of belonging. As these women reminisced about the Iraq that used to be, I noticed that their desire to belong to a nation again turned into a uniting force, especially as they compared their current situation in Egypt to what they had in Iraq.

**Egypt**

“Living where you don’t know how long you can stay is not a way to live.” Amira, a 41-year-old mother of six, told us. When she and other Iraqi refugees first got to Egypt, they were content with their temporary living arrangements. At least they had a place to stay, financial means, electricity, food, and security—things they lacked in Iraq. 70 year-old Leila made a similar point, explaining “this has been the happiest time for me, for I feel safe here…I was sick of living in fear [in Iraq].” Farrah told us that she felt the safest right after her airplane from Iraq landed in Egypt—she felt like she could finally be a child again.

These initial feelings of relief were short lived. Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol protecting the rights of refugees, but it only offers the most basic protections. According to the convention, refugees have many of the same rights as citizens. Egypt’s interpretation of these laws doesn’t allow refugees to exercise these rights, as Egypt only provides them asylum. The UNHCR mandates that urban refugees be self-sufficient; not being able to work, leave the country, or attend public school makes self-sufficiency really difficult for refugees living in Cairo to obtain. Refugees living in Egypt are prevented from becoming part of Egyptian society and are unable to secure economic stability, educational opportunities, or permanent residency for their families. As their displacement becomes more prolonged, these problems are growing larger.

Mustafa’s wife said that she “wants to return life back to the children…right now they do not have life in them.” Their family has suffered from their exclusion from Egyptian society, and this suffering has been exacerbated by their long displacement in Cairo. Two of the six children cannot go to school because the family cannot afford it. Although the children are getting older, they still must sleep together in one room because their apartment is small. One son is sick with cancer, but he isn't getting sufficient medical care or the treatment he so desperately needs. They need a solution, and they cannot remain in Cairo because Mustafa can’t work.

Mustafa said that if he had a stable income in Egypt, “I would never leave Egypt because I am socially comfortable here.” He also said, “Egyptians are my brothers.” Nora shares Mustafa’s sense of social comfort living in Egypt. “Many Egyptians hug us, love us, and come to see us when we need them. They help us,” she said. Mustafa and Nora each feel at ease in Egyptian society and have Egyptian friends. Because of their families’ financial statuses, they cannot remain in Egypt. They like Egyptians, but they need livelihoods and citizenship. Social acceptance isn’t enough.

The socially uncomfortable have an exacerbated sense of alienation and lack
of belonging in Egypt. Eman believes there are no good Egyptians—they deceive people. 52-year-old Sabeen doesn’t have Egyptian friends because she thinks Egyptians take advantage of Iraqis and do not keep their promises. Even the socially comfortable are concerned about their safety once again in post-revolutionary Egypt, having been reminded of the war in Iraq. As Nida put it, she “felt safe when she came to Egypt, but then lost this feeling when the revolution happened…Now I am afraid of Egypt. I need safety and to live in a secure country.”

Having a relative sense of social comfort is not an adequate foundation upon which to build lives. In displacement, Iraqi refugees have faced problems with their livelihoods and security. Their lives in Egypt don’t provide them with the means with which to secure personal rights and protections. This is forcing them to look for other ways to find security in social, economic, and political terms.

The asylum that Egypt offers ensures refugees their right to live. Because they lack citizenship rights and can’t fully participate in Egyptian society, they are deprived of having fulfilled lives. When asked what makes up a good life, many Iraqi refugees gave the same answers: stability, safety, security in both social and economic terms, and education. Increasingly, these components of the good life are unattainable for them in Egypt. The protection Egypt has offered them, the right to life, is no longer sufficient because a life is not fulfilled without rights and protections that a state usually provides. A good life, in many of these refugees’ eyes, entails belonging to a state, a state that will ensure their protection and their rights.

Resettlement

“I stopped everything in my life because I was waiting for resettlement…in the U.S.,” 19-year-old Jamal told us. “I can start working and have a fair life. For a lot of people here and in Iraq, life is not fair.” Jamal “lost [his] future” living in Egypt. When we asked what made him happy, he said “when my future is good; when I catch my future—when I go to the U.S.” To have a good future means to resettle to another country. Iraqi refugees cannot return to Iraq, nor can they live fulfilled lives in Egypt, so they have turned to resettlement as the solution to their problems.

Displacement in Egypt has forced Iraqi refugees to realize that in order to have a good, thriving life, they must be citizens somewhere their citizenship affords them full rights. Resettling and becoming citizens somewhere else, they will regain access to exercise their rights, and live
protected as citizens of a state.

Mustafa is having many problems attempting to provide for his family, problems he attributes directly to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. He believes it is the duty of the United States to come up with solutions for Iraqi refugees, and is adamant that the United States is the sole cause of his suffering in Egypt. After listening to Mustafa criticize the United States for almost an hour, I was surprised to hear him say that the U.S. is his first choice for a resettlement country. Although he disagrees with what the U.S. government has done politically, he does not have a problem with American life and people. Mustafa’s criticisms of the United States combined with his desire to live there reveal the tensions between resettlement, political belonging, and citizenship.

Most of the refugees we spoke to in Cairo didn’t have a problem resettling to the United States. Even though the United States, in essence, caused their displacement, their intense desire to become citizens of a country where they will be able to enjoy the rights and protections of a citizen trumped all. 52-year-old Hamid wants to resettle to a Western country for the strong justice and legal systems—systems Iraq lacks and Egypt hasn’t provided. “When you’re a citizen of the United States,” he explained, “you have rights and you must perform duties. This is not the case in Iraq…[in the United States] they guarantee your rights and others’ rights.”

When we asked Hamid if resettling to another country would challenge his sense of being Iraqi, he asked me how my parents, born in Korea, would respond to such a question. “Does your dad not remember his country and childhood? Can he not be a peaceful intermediary?” Hamid’s question showed how he believed that becoming a citizen wherever he resettled would not conflict with his Iraqi identity. Rather, he believes he can identify with and belong to two countries, albeit in different ways. His personal relationship with Iraq would not change when resettled; “only [his] lifestyle would change.”

We asked Hamid if he thinks his children will lose their connection to Iraq when they resettle. “I am not concerned about that,” he said. “The link is established by the birth of a child from a mother. As long as their father and mother are with them, things will be the same. The place does not matter. Jamal, the 19-year-old who believes his future depends on resettlement, explained, “During the war, I lost my home; this happened to everyone. I don't care though. I don't care about Iraq or about nationality...I was in a country when I was a kid, and now I am in another country with other people and they are different.”

Jamal’s understanding of his changing citizenship through displacement is much different than Hamid’s, most likely a result of the generational differences of those displaced. The experiences of Iraqi refugees in Iraq and in displacement will greatly affect their experiences in resettlement, more drastically for those of different generations. Hamid spent most of his life in Iraq, creating a strong Iraqi identity; but for those whose displacement has defined much of their life, that attachment to Iraq may become more complicated, especially in resettlement.

Conclusion

As displacement becomes more protracted and as their state of limbo gets ever more wearying, Iraqi refugees are now looking for ways to regain a sense of political identity and enjoy the rights and protections of citizenship in order to secure what they need for the future of their children and families. With few prospects for returning to Iraq and limited possibilities to sustain lives in Egypt, they hope for resettlement to a Western country. It is through resettlement, and the subsequent citizenship and political belonging that this can provide, that Iraqi refugees hope to live their lives again. Resettlement offers economic stability, educational opportunities, permanent residency, and political inclusion—what they need for a secure future.

Resettlement is the logical and obligatory next step. Iraqi refugees urgently need to become citizens of a country that will provide them with the basic building blocks of a fulfilling life. But the reality is that fewer than 1,000 refugees of the tens of thousands of refugees (including Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean refugees) registered with the UNHCR in all of Cairo were resettled last year. Facing not being able to return to Iraq and harsh, constricted living conditions in Egypt, Iraqi refugees hold on to the hope that resettlement will liberate them from the half-lives they seem to live in Egypt. As Eman put it, “I still have hope, even if it is only one percent.” Increasingly, this one percent seems to be all they may have.

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What does happiness mean for refugees?

A lavish, remarkable spread with tea, bread, cake, and lamb-filled treats was laid out on the table in front of us. I did not even wish to touch the food for fear of ruining its elegance. The air in the room was calm, as Fatima asked me, “What would you like to drink, habibti?” The mood felt brighter than I expected, and soon, I forgot that I was in the home of a refugee.

There to interview Fatima, our group of six students started asking about the significant moments in her life. The mood darkened. The plates of delicious treats did not seem so picturesque, and the air was not as clear. Just like narrating a grocery list, Fatima enumerated the events of her life. “First we lived in a stable country. After the invasion, it all was destroyed and there was no safety. There were crimes…My father died…The death of my mother…it was painful…The invasion of Iraq by Americans…the accidental shooting of my 17-year-old niece…the explosion of my brother who was just trying to do his job…It affected me and my family so much in all of our life. Before the invasion, I was very afraid that America would come…There were explosions…I couldn’t sleep because I had dreams of these things…The terrorist group tried to kidnap my husband, so we had to leave.” She continued, “It all happened so fast, and now, we are here. What is this place? It is not my home.”

This past March, we spent 26 days working closely with Iraqi refugees living in Cairo, conducting life story interviews. These individuals opened up their homes, revealed the pain that they had experienced and still endure in their everyday lives, and expressed their hopes for the future.

I wanted to understand whether Iraqi refugees displaced in Cairo are happy, or if they possess some sense of happiness despite living in difficult circumstances. I planned to use the works of scholars in the field of happiness to help me understand whether the refugees were happy or not, and to determine if happiness fit in the context of the life of a refugee. As soon as I started my first interview, I realized that happiness scholars weren’t considering refugees’ lives in their research or definitions.

I quickly discovered that I had given myself an impossible task. The happiness that I know—the bubbly personality and constant, energetic smile that someone possesses—was not the happiness that fits in the context of refugees. They weren’t bubbly. They didn’t smile constantly or shout for joy. They instead shouted for help. One Iraqi woman told me, “We need help. We have been waiting now for five years. Will they answer our calls? The IOM has made us wait for five years. We need resettlement.” They are waiting to find a place to call home, including one woman who wants a house “with my own furnishings…with decorations that I made myself.”

We heard about numerous hardships experienced by Iraqi refugees while they were in Iraq and Egypt, all caused by or causing their displacement. They talked about and showed us pictures of immediate family members who lost their lives to violence. Fatima told us about her brother’s death: “See, here. This is my brother. He leaned up against a car, just to watch it for them, and it exploded…

One refugee explained, “You feel happy when you pray.”

by MALENA PRICE
it exploded on my brother. And look, this is what they sent me...what was left of him: his blood, limbs, and only half of his face.” Other refugees spoke of relatives that they had left behind in Iraq and how much they wanted to see them. With sadness in her eyes, Amal said, “I would do anything for just one week... one week, to see my family again.” Although Amal had friends in Egypt, she felt the comfort they provided was nothing like the comfort and stability provided by the presence of her family. “The friends that I’ve made here are nice, but they are not my family,” she said. “I just need my family—the people that I can talk to, complain to, and share my feelings.”

Iraqi refugees can’t legally work in Egypt. The refugees we interviewed told us that they sit and watch TV every day as they remember a past when they were doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Sarah touched upon this when she said, “My husband was once an engineer, but now, he sits and reads the newspaper all day.” Others spoke about how their degrees mean nothing now. Nostalgic for a life that she once lived, Fatima said, “I loved my job. I loved to have my own salary. I feel very good when I am doing something. I went to many schools in order to increase the chance for work, but this means nothing now.” Their money is quickly running out, if it has not already. Fatima, who was one of the most financially disadvantaged refugees we met, went on to say, “We ran out of money. My daughter sends me money from Iraq when she can, but for now, a Christian family leased me this home and only charges me half of the money for the rent.”

Many refugees’ homes were wiped out before their very eyes. Lemea looked straight ahead, with desperation in her eyes, and told us, “Everything was destroyed. Everything was gone. Every beautiful thing was gone.” Many like Lemea questioned when their troubles will be over, when they will have peace, when things will just be stable. Lemea went on to say, “I just want peace. I just want to live a stable life.” Many Egyptians died during the Egyptian revolution, which caused the Iraqi refugees to continue to constantly fear for the safety of their families. Wafa looked around her apartment and shamefully said, “Not even one percent safety for my children...After the revolution, you have to lock your doors at night. And sometimes, even that does not help.”

While Iraqi refugees may not use the adjective happy to describe their emotional state, they still find moments of joy amidst difficult events and conditions. They have found ways to cope with the adversity presented in their lives, to have hope for now and for the future. Religion is a major source of this strength, giving them an outlet to cope with past and present trials. In addition, familial and spousal support provides hope, moments of happiness, and distraction from the challenges of life. Their children’s pursuit of education also gives them hope,
“Let us speak about happier things, not sadness. I’m very optimistic.”

as they imagine how their children’s future success will come about as a result of their academic achievements now.

Um Omar spoke about her husband. “My husband makes me happy. He supports me. We shared a love story...yes, it was a love story.” Like many of the women that we interviewed, Um Omar smiled when she spoke about her husband. She was excited to talk about him. She spoke about the hardships that they had endured during their marriage. These included her husband’s involvement in the Iran-Iraq war. “He was in the front and fighting. I worried a lot about him.” She would see him one month and not the other. However, they “still loved each other. And we made it all work.” She spoke of collaboration. “We make the decisions together, and he consults me when we need to make a decision. We try to see what is the best solution... I am happy because of my marriage.” Adiba described her husband as an exemplary father: “My husband is good with my children. He helps me take care of them.”

The refugees we spoke to described the comfort they find in the presence of their children, of their families. Sarab described a warm, open relationship with her children: “I love them so much. I consider them my friends. Even now, I play with them. I share everything with them. All details, even about finances. I teach them what’s most important in life and how to deal with problems.” Another Iraqi woman said, “I’m happy because my parents are still alive.”

Family contributes to happiness in several ways. On one hand, the presence of family evokes love, happiness, comfort, and joy. Many refugees said that it is nice to have friends, but they need their families. Amina said, “You have days when you just need someone to complain to—someone who knows you better than everyone else.” Although all her family members are not physically present with her, she still finds happiness because she knows that they are still living. With family, refugees can temporarily forget their trials, and even if it is just for a moment, feel happiness.

Refugees also described experiencing moments of happiness as they practiced their faith. Nora described a feeling of relief: “Sometimes it comes from inside yourself. You feel happy when you pray.” Religion frames appropriate behavior and ways of living. Fatima said, “Religion organized my life.” Another woman explained that “Islam means practicing forgiveness, kindness, being close to your family, and charity.” She continued to say, “I believe in God. Religion is the most important thing. Religion doesn’t mean the shape. Religion means how to behave with people, and in life, and is morality.” One woman described how the Quran gave her comfort and helped her to feel calm. Another woman spoke of her struggle with her marriage. Her husband wanted to remarry, and it was very hard for her to live happily with her children. However, she spends a great deal of time praying, and she knew that God would help her through her struggle.

Dunya spoke about the central role of Islam in her everyday life: “I wake up and pray. I pray throughout the day, and I pray before I go to sleep. I also read religious books throughout the day to help me understand Islam more.” She also spoke of the fear that she harbors about her children attending school, but she prays for their protection, and she knows that with her prayers, God will protect them,” Inshaa Allah, or God willing, a phrase many refugees used whenever they spoke of something potentially, or hopefully, happening. Their experiences were framed in terms of God’s will, including their own trials and suffering, and they thanked God with the words, “Alhumdulillah.” God is always present in these refugees’ lives, a constant, stable presence that helps them temporarily forget their burdens and gives them hope and strength to face the trials in their lives.

Asma advises her children “to study hard. An educational certificate is the best thing they can have. I had a condition and I couldn’t continue my education, but they can.” Fikriyah expressed a similar sentiment, and many parents said that they want their children do better than they did. Maha said, “Education is so important for people and they need to be educated. When people learn when they are young, it’s like writing on a rock, it won’t ever disappear.” Indeed, every refugee I interviewed stressed the importance of education.

Iraqi refugees spend a substantial portion of their day doing homework with their children. Jana said, “My youngest son spends two hours, the middle child spends four hours, and the oldest child does homework all day. When my children are educated, I feel good.” She then asked her children to come into the living room with their report cards so that we could see their excellent grades. A smile came upon her face when she passed us their report cards. “See,” she said, “They are doing so well.” Another woman spoke of her husband. She said that he believes with an education, his children can succeed.

“Let us speak about happier things, not sadness. I’m very optimistic,” one refugee insisted. Many spoke about their optimism and how they attempted to focus on more positive aspects of their lives. Nadia described herself as strong and optimistic, explaining “Strong doesn’t just mean physically, but means you have to face problems and things mentally, and to know how to be successful in life. I learned from my grandmother that everything will be good for you, but when you’re pessimistic, everything will be against you. So you have to be
Most of the refugees that we interviewed hinted at some kind of hope. Amid the chaos in Cairo, they were sometimes able to smile and think positively, showing me that while displacement is difficult, moments of happiness exist.

Nadia spoke of a great deal of adversity during her interview, just like many other refugees did. She told us about missing her family—only her husband and children live in Egypt. She doesn't feel safe. “First we lived in a stable country. After the invasion, it all was destroyed and there was no safety. There were crimes.” Despite all this, Nadia is still optimistic. Although many refugees suffer from disease, lack of funds, depression, fear for their safety, and lack of jobs, they still have hope. They still remember what it was like when they had everything, and instead of losing hope, they stay optimistic and remember that life can and will be better one day. It would not be fair to describe all the refugees we spoke to in this way, as some focused mostly on the hardships and suffering that they endured. However, I found that most refugees that we interviewed hinted at some kind of hope. Amid the chaos in Cairo, they were sometimes able to smile and think positively, showing me that while displacement is difficult, moments of happiness exist.

Conclusion

I admired the tabouli, delicious treats, and hot, spicy tea. The mood shifted. I realized that these refugees had found strength and possessed hope even in terrible circumstances. I took a bite of food, mustered up a smile for Fatima, and began to take my notes.
THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF MEMORY

IN THE AFTERMATH of the 2011 revolution, the world has its eyes on Egypt, watching and waiting to see what will happen in the coming years. Largely out of view, Iraqi refugees living there remain mostly forgotten by the government, Egyptian citizens, and the global community. Lacking access to services, the right to work, and educational opportunities, and having fled after the invasion of Iraq and ensuing violence, they remain in Egypt, also watching and waiting to see what will happen.

I am interested in what memories mean for us as individuals. Through our interviews and listening to the stories of Iraqi refugees, it became clear that every individual places different levels of significance on memories and has his or her own tale to tell.

We interviewed Leila, a 70-year-old woman with an abundance of energy and many stories to share about almost every aspect of her life. She answered every question we asked, often talking for so long that we politely suggested we move on to another topic for fear we would run out of time. 19-year-old Jamal framed his life in the context of the future. Though he appeared to be shy, he remained open with his responses. We also held focus groups with two groups of Iraqi women, and these discussions often involved sharing memories in which collective ideas of home and the past were developed. Everyone we interviewed was gracious and welcomed us into their homes and lives. The hospitality they demonstrated was more than we expected; in return, we said we would

by JAMIE BERGSTROM
Leila: The Reservoir of Memory

When I first met Leila, she greeted me with a cheerful “hello habibi, hello, welcome habibi.” She escorted our group into her house and invited us to sit and eat the food she spent the day preparing. She poured us her Iraqi juice, which she described as “the best,” and passed them around to each of us. As we ate and drank, it became apparent that she was an open book. Then she turned to us and said, “Okay, ask me questions.”

We explained that we were interested in hearing about her life, both the good and the bad. For a woman who initially seemed so jubilant, I did not expect that Leila would say that most of her life was sad and later that “nothing was happy.” She reflected on her life with such sorrow.

Leila had a remarkable memory and knew the precise date of nearly every event she mentioned. She recounted her life story in great depth and told us about each event in her life as if she were compiling a timeline—the notable exception being events related to her husband’s abduction. Understandably, she said her memory of these events was foggy, she couldn’t say how long he was gone, and explained that she didn’t want to remember this time of her life.

Leila got married in 1967, and she, her husband, and daughter Masoon traveled frequently to Europe because of her husband’s job with BP. She told us this regular travel stopped in 1982 after her husband was forced to retire after he was kidnapped. Leila moved to Egypt in 2006, fearing for her husband and family. She made the trip alone so that her daughter could finish her studies and spent eight months waiting for her family to join her. In this time, she made house repairs and attempted to decorate, but mainly sat in her new home as a refugee, alone. In these eight months by herself, Leila was cut off from everyone except her husband and daughter, whom she talked to in occasional phone calls.

At one point in the interview, Leila retrieved a box of photographs. She went through hundreds of pictures, smiling as memories surfaced, and told us about every picture with great detail. It grew overwhelming as she continued going through the box, which appeared to be a reservoir of memory for her. When she got to her photographs of Europe, she shared many more memories than she’d originally mentioned—she had previously summarized it as “travel with husband.” She talked about her friends all over the world and the luxurious life she had once known of attending fashion shows and wearing designer clothes. The blue cups we drank from, she told us, were purchased on one of her many excursions during this time.

The interview had gone from happy to sad back to happy again. She explained that it was important for her to recall these positive memories during the eight months she lived alone in Egypt, because as she put it, “if you stay alone, black thoughts come to your mind.” All she wants now, she explained, is to die “in peace” within two or three years of resettlement. When we asked when Leila thinks she will be resettled, she responded with a pessimistic,
“I do not know my dear. I am very sorry.” But her positive memories of parts of her past provide her with the ability to, as she phrased it, “feel normal again.”

Jamal: The Void of Forgetting

The majority of Leila’s life was spent in Iraq, with some time spent traveling around Europe. 19 year-old Jamal, however, has lived almost half of his life in Egypt, arriving at the age of ten and living in Cairo ever since. His idea of home is not rooted in his past but rather in his present and his memories are under constant construction.

Before the interview formally began, Jamal made it very clear that he plans to leave Egypt soon and is seeking resettlement to the United States. As we later learned, his first meeting with the IOM (International Organization for Migration) was in 2008 and he is still waiting for a decision. He explained that his case should be approved because everything is in order and he is just waiting for an official “yes” so that he can finally resettle.

Jamal’s life story revolved around his future in the United States. He is teaching himself English so that he will be prepared when he attends an American university and law school. His life story was so focused on his longing for resettlement and conceptions of the future that we had to interject and ask Jamal directly about his past. He responded, “a few things happened—just the war, and kidnapped, and came to Egypt.” I was stunned that he summarized his entire past in thirteen words. For most people, experiencing a war, kidnapping and migrating to a second country is more than a “few things.” For Jamal, these are fragments of a past that is not to be remembered.

He did tell us more about his past, recounting how he had been kidnapped by a Shiite militia when he was only 10 years old. He did not say much, only that they kidnapped him and demanded $40,000 from his family as ransom, a sum that took his family three days to gather. Once the ransom was paid, his family reunited with him in a hospital, and that is all he remembers. Jamal recounted this in a monotone, showing no emotion when he spoke. This was not just the only memory of the past that Jamal shared, but from his perspective, the only memory he has: he remembers nothing before the war except this. Directly after his kidnapping his family fled to Egypt, which is very much where his life began.

Following his arrival in Egypt, Jamal received treatment for two years. He says he is “fine now.” However, Jamal told us that he lost his future when he came to Egypt and left Iraq. He continued to tell us that there was
not so much to explain; he can’t receive an education in Egypt and his family is not stable. He said the only thing that will make him happy will be “when my future is good; when I catch my future...when I go to U.S.”

Absence and forgetting characterize Jamal’s life. He has developed a void in place of memories. His forgotten past could explain why he focuses his energy in thinking of the future. In his eyes, his life has barely begun because his future won’t begin until he goes to the United States, even if that means waiting another four years. But what will his memories look like then? He left Iraq so young and has now built his life around a seemingly unattainable dream of coming to America; nothing else seems to matter, not even his past. For that reason, he forgets.

Focus Groups and a Shared Memory

For people like Jamal, forgetting is a way to escape a horrific past. For others, their pasts hold their fondest memories, and remembering gives them power. Making the decision to preserve memory is powerful, something that was apparent in the collective setting of the Iraqi women’s focus groups we convened.

In both focus group meetings, we began by asking the women to draw a time when they felt safe and share this experience with everyone. The women spent time chatting with each other and working on their pictures. One woman drew a picture of greenery and a small farmhouse, explaining that she was born in the seventies and was very young at the start of the Iran-Iraq war. She remembered that her father would gather all of her siblings in their small farmhouse, which was surrounded by a big garden with many plants and small hills. She told us she felt safe then and remarked, “I still remember that memory.”

A woman next to her nodded her head in agreement, saying, “I have the same memory.” An older woman in the group then spoke up to explain why the women had such nostalgic memories. She said a lot of men died in war, creating a lot of widows. She explained that families tried as hard as they could to stay together, despite the sudden and devastating deaths, but it was difficult amidst all the commotion.

Another woman began to elaborate on this point by telling us that they would always gather with family and friends for big celebrations like the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad. She told us on behalf of the group that when they are asked about a safe place, “We remember our old good days.” She said the “old good days” refer to being with friends and family in the home. We were told that Iraqis are social and they can’t live alone. The isolation caused by displacement is especially difficult, and they cope by remembering with fondness the times they spent with their families in the past.

One woman explained how these memories affect them now. She said that when her family joined her in Egypt, they were initially happy because they were back together again. As time passed, she realized family was not enough—she lacked the social connections with friends they were accustomed to.

At a second focus group, the women revealed very different memories of the past. They were asked to draw an image of their childhood home and share with the group. Rather than drawing their homes like the first group, they took a broader approach. They drew images of Iraq rather than actual houses. Many of the women drew a map of Iraq as well as the palm tree and hearts to show their love of the country. We were informed that palm trees grew beautifully in Iraq and are a symbol of their country. The drawings ranged from people and trees to symbols and poems. All conveyed the same message: these women miss the past. Even their wartime memories inspire longing, because they then still had family and friends nearby. Now the only things they truly have are memories. In the memories they share and hold onto, they have the power to preserve the past.

The Multiple Meanings

Despite collective or cultural influences, memories still represent what is important to us as individuals. The life story interviews we conducted provide contrasting views on how people share their stories and how they view the past. Some people see the past as a time of happiness, others see the past as something to forget, and still others remember the past together because it gives them validation they need in a hopeless situation. For me, memory means a chance to listen and an opportunity to share the memories of the forgotten.
SEARCHING FOR WELLBEING

The situation in post-revolutionary Cairo adds to the stress, anxiety, and hopelessness many Iraqi refugees living there experience daily.

SHE LOOKS AT THE PEOPLE around her, adjusting her hijab and watching the time on her watch. The line continues far behind her, onto the patch of grass across the narrow street. She finally reaches the front and clears her throat as she rehearses her appeal in broken English in her head. She can’t believe she is back here once again—back to the familiar bulletproof glass of the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) office, back to the distant officers, back to flashing the useless blue card identifying herself as a refugee, back to the confusion and frustration. The uncomfortably familiar feeling of hopelessness forms a pit in her stomach. She hopes for financial assistance, for medical care, and for someone to hear her desperation and allow her to move out of the chaos and instability. She stands there, in front of the bulletproof glass separating her from the officer whose hands hold her fate, and waits—as she’s been waiting for years—stuck in the massive city of Cairo as an Iraqi refugee.

Cairo is a blur of millions of cars, millions of grains of sand, and millions of people. Among these millions of people, over 45,000 refugees survive day to day in conditions that often negatively affect their wellbeing. Although refugees travel the same chaotic roads as Egyptians, they do so without access to many of the rights that provide the basic needs of humanity. Refugees are expected to be self-sufficient according to UNHCR, but they do not have access to worker’s permits or adequate financial assistance because of the disproportionately high number of refugees relative to the available resources. Refugee children are not allowed to attend Egyptian public schools. Some attend private schools, adding to their parents’ financial burdens. UNHCR and affiliated partners like Caritas are supposed to provide medical care, but these resources are also scarce. Compounding everything, post-revolutionary Cairo is rife with safety and security concerns. Daily stress and anxiety levels are high, to say the least, and negatively impact Iraqi refugees’ overall wellbeing.

In life story interviews, we explored the social and psychological challenges that Iraqi refugees face in Cairo as they try to survive in
the harsh environment away from their war-torn home. Stuck in a state of limbo, they endlessly wait for the possibility of resettlement in a more stable country. Like many refugees, the Iraqis in Cairo are victims of violence and trauma, and the added daily stress they face in Egypt means that stress, anxiety, and hopelessness are part of everyday life.

**Life Story Interviews**

The Iraqi refugees we interviewed led and directed their interviews towards personally impactful themes. We heard stories that encompassed life in Iraq, displacement in Cairo, and their concerns and expectations for the future. Several themes emerged—a lack of access to education and job opportunities; limited assistance from refugee aid organizations; loss of safety and security in Cairo post-revolution; and resettlement issues and concerns—all of which potentially affect their physical and mental wellbeing.

**Lack of Access to Education, Aid, and Financial Resources**

46-year-old Mustafa lives in a humble apartment in Giza with his wife and six children. From the beginning, Mustafa used the interview as an opportunity to vent his frustration with the Iraqi refugee situation in Cairo and America's insensitive foreign policy, stating, “animals in America are treated better than Iraqi humans.” He was a successful self-employed businessman in Iraq; suddenly he is a father who cannot provide for his kids. Five of his six children are currently in school, but he does not think that he will be able to afford their tuition next year. The sixth has been diagnosed with cancer—and he isn't being treated in Cairo. Every night, Mustafa thinks about his financial problems and ways to find money, sadly confessing that he has to give his children “less food and drink here” in Egypt.

Mustafa doesn't receive aid from any of UNHCR's partners. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) had partially funded his children's tuition, but the revolution has hampered its and other NGOs' ability to operate in Egypt. Mustafa has no worker's permit, so he has no job, and his savings are quickly running out. When we asked what he thinks makes a good life, he responded, “a source of income,” so he could live happily with his family and provide for his children.

The son with cancer is not receiving adequate medical care in Cairo, and yet they are not being resettled. When we discussed the most significant moments in his life, he told us that after leaving Iraq, he has never had a single happy moment. He continued to tell us that the only solution he has thought of for his problems is to commit suicide, but because of his religion, he will not. Throughout the interview, Mustafa's wife and occasionally his sick son interjected, asking for help and emphasizing their desperation with their conditions in Cairo.

Fatima is a 47-year-old single mother who lives with two of her children in an apartment owned by a Christian family who helps her pay rent. Fatima focused a majority of her interview on the trauma she faced due to the invasion and subsequent war in Iraq. After the death of her niece, mother, and brother—all causalities of the war after Fatima left Baghdad—she described herself as being “exhausted mentally and physically.” In detail, she described the gruesome
death of her brother and showed us a photograph of his dismembered body after he was killed in an explosion on the way to work. It was apparent that she was still tremendously affected by her brother’s traumatic death. While sobbing, she told us that she lost all of the people she loved, “especially my brother who was my main support.” She continued to explain how common it was to see people, including one of her former colleagues, getting shot in the streets of Baghdad.

During the interview, Fatima handed us a doctor’s note, which was a referral to get a “brain scan.” She told us that her doctor said she needs a brain scan because she “was so tired.” She described her symptoms as low blood circulation to the head, body tremors, and not being able to stand or walk at times. Fatima felt embarrassed when she got the referral for the scan. The doctor didn’t know she couldn’t afford it, so the referral meant nothing to her.

Fatima discussed her financial burdens and how she cannot afford anything, which causes her to spend most of her days at home. She has no access to employment, income, or aid, and complained about being dependent on people. “It’s difficult with no source of living,” she said. Without any job opportunities, aid from refugee assistance organizations, or medical attention for her mental and physical ailments, Fatima seemed utterly distressed and hopeless. These issues affect her in her daily life as a single woman, a mother, and a refugee without opportunities for resettlement.

41-year-old Amira lives with her husband, sons, and daughters-in-law in Sixth of October City. She began by describing her distress when her husband and sons were detained and held for ransom in Iraq. Afterward, they fled to Egypt, where, six years later, they continue to face many challenges. They did not know about UNHCR when they first arrived and struggled without assistance for a long time. Not long after they started receiving aid, the checks stopped. In the post-revolutionary upheaval, UNHCR funds had been paying for her husband’s and her son’s medical expenses, but now both have health problems. Because of birth defects, her son has trouble walking, reading, and writing. Doctors have recommended that he receive constant care and physiotherapy sessions. Her husband has high blood pressure and diabetes.

Along with financial strains caused by medical bills, affording tuition is also an issue. She said that “it is the ambition of any mother to see her sons and daughters to get education to fulfill their dreams.” Paying rent is a problem every month because they have no source of income. “Yes I know [money] is not everything, but it is a way to make things go on, it is important to be able to support day-to-day life,” she said. These financial burdens and the lack of control over her family’s medical care means that Amira’s daily life is full of immense stress and frustration.

Mustafa’s, Fatima’s, and Amira’s concerns highlight the importance of financial stability—whether it is from having more access to job opportunities, or from receiving assistance from refugee aid organizations such as UNHCR, Caritas, and CRS—to overall wellbeing. Mustafa’s, Amira’s, and many other families’ financial aid was terminated after the revolution. Because refugees in Egypt do not have access to public education, families are forced to send their children to private schools, which takes additional money. Education is highly valued in Iraqi culture, and although most of our interviewees have managed to send their children to private schools, many families are beginning to run out of savings.

Medical care is another source of anxiety. Refugee aid organizations are not equipped with enough resources to provide care (not to mention consistently high-quality care) for everyone who needs it, and without income, refugees have extreme difficulty affording medical care. Mustafa and his family should qualify for resettlement under medical criteria, but there’s a disconnect between the availability of relocation opportunities and the number of refugees under the medical criteria umbrella. The result is tragic—refugees cannot resettle and don’t receive proper medical attention. The daily stress this causes is taking its toll on many of our interviewees’ wellbeing, leading to much frustration, physical health problems, mental health issues, and occasional suicidal thoughts.

Loss of Safety and Security in Egypt
We interviewed 41-year-old Imad at a café near his home. He preferred to have his interview in a location other than his apartment because he was worried about security. Throughout the interview, he was very anxious about security issues, asking us to speak quietly so no one would overhear our conversation. He also received multiple phone calls from his wife, and he told us that they call each other often to make sure that they are safe when they are not at home. Imad constantly feels chased and frequently moves to different parts of Cairo. He is having issues affording education and medical bills for his son, who needs surgery, and hopes to resettle for his son’s surgery and to educate his children.

44-year-old Aisha is warm and loving and lives with her sons and husband in a small apartment in Nasr City. She smiled at us while she removed her hijab.

A “No Exit’ sign in the busy Cairo metro symbolizes what Iraqi refugees living there feel: they can’t return to their war-torn country or resettle in the West.
and began talking about the separation of her family caused by the war and invasion. With tears in her eyes she described the pain of being away from family for so long. She talked about how she hopes to resettle because she does not feel safe in Egypt, just as she did not feel safe in Iraq. Describing a typical day, Aisha mentioned that she constantly worries about her children when they leave the apartment because of the situation in Egypt. “There is no safety … here it is very bad,” she said. She ended the interview by describing her need for stability and safety and how she is concerned about her psychological health.

Aisha’s and Imad’s interviews reflect the importance of safety and security and its strong impact on the daily lives of refugees in Cairo. Imad’s insecurities were based on his experiences in Iraq, which continued into his life in Cairo. Aisha attributed her security and safety issues to the environment in Cairo, especially in post-revolutionary Cairo. Fatima also mentioned, with obvious frustration, her views on Cairo’s safety: “I hate it, really tired, no comfort—not even one percent safety for my children.” Other Iraqi refugees we interviewed frequently talked about the security situation in Cairo, and their fears seemed to significantly contribute to their persistent stress and worry.

Resettlement Issues and Concerns
Most of the Iraqi refugees we interviewed emphasized their need to resettle, believing
resettlement would reduce their problems and provide more opportunities for themselves and their families. And as a general trend, most also experienced significant stress caused by the resettlement process. Its complexity, their lack of knowledge about their personal cases, barriers between the resettlement agencies and refugees, and the extremely long, uncertain nature of the proceedings all take a toll. Fatima said that she wants “to go to a state where I don’t think about moving from one country to the other.” She hopes to live in peace without fear, worry, or threats, and she believes that this is possible through resettlement. Although she has been trying to resettle with her two children, she said, “my case is at IOM since 2008, but I haven’t heard anything from them.”

Similarly, Mustafa discussed his need to be resettled to the United States to treat his son’s medical condition because “[America] is the reason for the problem, and should therefore be part of the solution.” Regardless of his efforts, Mustafa does not fit the resettlement criteria determined by UNHCR. In other informal conversations with Iraqi women refugees, it was apparent that cases being put on hold for an unspecified amount of time was a common issue. These women complained about being stuck in Cairo for several years and spoke of their deep desires to resettle to start a new, safer life in a western country. Someone said, “when they tell people to be ready, they should be sure,” and another “I deserve resettlement—I want to have chance like others.” One middle-aged woman described her frustration with being denied resettlement: “If they told me from the beginning that would’ve been good … I would’ve found another way.” Talking about resettlement revealed great stress, worry, and frustration that cut across all ages, genders, marital statuses, and family roles.

Stress and Iraqi Refugee Wellbeing
Our interviews emphasized the effects of urban displacement on the wellbeing of Iraqi refugees in Cairo. Most revealed immense distress over the very little control they had over their children’s educations, their financial situations, their safety and security, and their resettlement plans. As refugees, their lives were in the hands of distant UNHCR officers. Impersonal politics and a rigid migration system have left them in a state of limbo. Confined in Egypt with no escape except for the glimmer of hope in resettlement, and harboring fear-inducing memories of home, Iraqi refugees live day to day carrying heavy burdens, surviving years in a place they have yet to call home.

We know from the literature on refugees and mental health that the consequences of such sociopolitical realities can manifest as paralyzing mental health and physical issues—the very conditions our interviewees describe. Additionally, the combination of these stressors and the trauma they experienced in Iraq has the potential to lead to debilitating mental health disorders. The daily struggles of Iraqi refugees in Cairo highlight the need for aid organizations to do much, much more to prevent long-term health problems and improve the overall wellbeing of the displaced Iraqi population.

Kiran Bhai is a second-year student from Dallas, Texas, pursuing a Program II major in Global Health Policy and Ethics. She loves to dance and to spend time with her friends and family.
Men are expected to provide for their families, but displacement makes that difficult, if not impossible.

“Before the war, I lived naturally. My husband was able to secure our livelihoods and provide an income for our family. He was a construction worker; I took care of the house and the children.”

Displacement has significantly affected Iraqi refugees, disrupting their political and religious identities, their financial stability, their relationships to others, and their access to sources of safety and support. The effects of these concerns, worries, and changes converge when discussing family life, and they are particularly evident when observing the ways in which masculinities, or the roles, expectations, and responsibilities of men, change in displacement. Family structure plays a significant part in the lives of most Iraqis. The men of the family are regarded as the heads and leaders—people who make final decisions, exert control, and take on the responsibilities of family wellbeing and financial and physical security. The stresses and demands of displacement are reflected strongly in these behaviors, and because men play such prominent roles in Iraqi families, any changes in their behaviors are amplified in family settings.

Iraqi masculinities have been interrupted by displacement. Men’s roles, responsibilities, and expectations have fundamentally changed in ways that do not allow them to live up to former norms and standards of masculinity. Much of the discussion of gender relations in the Middle East has focused on women, but ignoring the processes that subordinate women misses a key dimension. Masculinity has been given too little attention in this discussion. Changing masculinities affect entire refugee families and reflect both the struggles of displacement and the ways in which men cope with them.

So much of masculinity has to do with marriage, familial responsibility, and expectations for

by RONNIE WIMBERLEY
This is post-Egyptian Revolution street graffiti depicting a unified family. Family is a unit of great significance in Middle Eastern culture.

Family Roles and Structure

A typical Iraqi refugee family in Cairo might include a wife who cooks, cleans, raises the children, takes care of the home, and who may also be employed outside of the home. She has likely been college educated. Her husband is college educated as well, and he would be the main wage earner, make major decisions, and be responsible for the family’s wellbeing. Sons would only be expected to focus on schoolwork, while daughters would learn household management from their mothers while attending school.

Each member of the family has had to change the way they conceptualize their responsibilities, and these changes have informed and changed men. Khalid, a 52-year-old refugee living in Giza, described his son. “Bilal is a rebel and he has not been studying...[he] does not want to go to school or have a private tutor...he spends a lot of time playing video games and playing with friends instead of studying. Bilal is only 14, and he does not know what is in his best interest yet... He stays up late until 7am playing games so that he does not have to go to school. I try hard to make him, but I cannot tell him what to do.” Khalid’s role in the family and his ability to act as the head of the household changed in Egypt. He has relinquished some power, explaining, “I cannot tell him what to do,” and recognized that his son has begun to lose interest in his only responsibility.

Khalid’s story also speaks to the ways that the changing roles of the women in men’s lives have affected their masculinities. In many aspects, Iraqi men share power with their wives, with husbands typically having the final say in most family members. The roles of and expectations for each member of the family sit at the core of family structure. However, displacement forces refugees to renegotiate their expectations and roles in the household both to secure the wellbeing of families and to cope with the ways in which meeting certain expectations become impossible.

Changes in masculinities fall into two major categories. The first is emotional and psychological adjustment. This largely has to do with the ways male refugees talk about their changing moods, emotions, and psychological wellbeing since their displacement. The second is the search for stability. This encompasses the ways in which men cope with the hardships they endure as refugees. Refugees spoke often about lacking stability and certainty in many aspects of their lives, especially since the revolution. Coping methods often included increased reliance on religion and God. Because displacement affects nearly every aspect of refugees’ lives, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and there is broad overlap among the different aspects of each category.
matters. Power relations within the home are critical to masculinity because this is the domain in which men typically have control. Bilal’s activities undermine Khalid’s ability to play the role of father and man in the home. When we asked him how he tries to make Bilal listen, he said, “As a man, I sometimes get oppressive. Lately, I let my wife do it. Sometimes she succeeds and sometimes she does not.”

Men in some families have taken on more responsibilities as house caretakers, a role typically reserved for women. Khalid said, “Sometimes I cook and do the housework because I have more time than my wife. I do not want to bother her from her schoolwork.” Iraqi men had not helped out in the home because they had jobs; now Khalid has more free time than his student wife. Since refugees are not legally allowed to work in Egypt, men’s roles have changed significantly, and adjusting to this newfound failure to provide has been complicated, particularly in emotional and psychological ways.

**Emotional and Psychological Adjustment**

Iraqi men are typically expected to be breadwinners. However, each family we interviewed noted their decreasing financial freedom and their income instability. As Malik, a 50-year-old man living in Sixth of October City, explained in an interview, “It is my job to pay for the home and provide for the family.” He was not working at the time of the interview. He said that he was easily agitated, that he had lost his job in Egypt, and that his education was not being put to use. Because refugee men are not legally allowed to work in Egypt, Malik’s story is not the exception, but the rule. Remittances or savings, not secure jobs, mostly support Iraqi refugee families. This inability to provide for families adds to Iraqi refugee men’s stress.

Since they can’t work, many Iraqi men complained of idleness in their daily lives. When we asked men about typical days in their lives, they often mentioned television, the news, and doing nothing at all. “I do not do anything. I stay at home all day, and so does my wife and my sick son,” said Salam in one interview. Television typically served as a way to keep up with the news and the situation in both Egypt and Iraq.

In addition to feeling idle, refugee men also mentioned changes in their psychological and emotional health, changes that manifested themselves in irritability, boredom, and emotional breakdown. Rawan’s husband “has changed a lot and become more irritable,” she said. “We quarrel more about small things because he stays in the house and is bored.” Irritability and boredom were common complaints of many of the refugees with whom we spoke. One interviewee, Mustafa, expressed his emotional distress during the interview as opposed to merely describing it.

Mustafa has five children, one of whom has been diagnosed with cancer, and a wife. He, like most Iraqi refugees in Egypt, has no job or steady income. When he first arrived in Egypt, “everything was fine… I only expected to be here for about a year. But it has been six years since I left Iraq.” He had received funding to subsidize the education of his children from Catholic Relief Services, but he recently found out the funding would end. Without it, Mustafa said he would have to take all of his children out of school.

This all came out before we could start the interview. Mustafa spoke quickly, stumbling over his words at times. He pointed at me occasionally in anger to express his feelings toward America. He then calmed down and said “It had gotten to the point that I would commit suicide if I could; but Islam forbids this. That is the only reason I have not.” His wife and children were in the room.

**The Search for Stability**

Iraqi refugee families in Egypt have been stripped of much of their agency. Men are expected to provide for their families, but displacement makes that difficult, if not impossible. They can’t work legally, and, UNHCR, NGOs, and other organizations that work with refugees can’t provide any real protection. The Egyptian government does little to mitigate refugee vulnerabilities; and with last year’s revolution, refugees are now in need of physical protection in addition to legal and financial assistance.

Certainty and stability are neither guaranteed nor easily attained. Men, as the leaders in the home, have increasingly turned to religion and God. The men we interviewed cited different reasons for this, but the most common was their inability to rely on anything else.

Khalid exemplified this point during our interview. A believer in all religions, he said “anyone who has suffered from a crisis resorts to God. If there is a problem you’re unable to solve, you pray to God. When no human beings can help, one can gain strength and endurance from God.” At a point in their lives when solutions are inaccessible, almost every interviewee talked about religion and a changed relationship to God mainly because of their displacement and the resulting insecurity and instability.

Men spoke about security and stability constantly. Mustafa said that he would return to Iraq “if it were safe…only if the US and the Iraqi government were able to secure my safety.” Another interviewee, Hassan, addressed his concern with
Iraqi refugee men’s gender roles have changed substantially. Displacement has forced them to grapple with changing degrees of autonomy and agency, emotional distress, shifting familial infrastructure, fleeting hopes, and lowered expectations. Because of displacement, men are losing their ability to realize what they have always known to be their roles as men, and are thus forced to redefine their manhood. The changes and losses refugee men experience are expressed in multiple aspects of their lives. When looking to their psychological health, there are signs of increasing stress and feelings of irritability and idleness; when looking at family stability, men struggle with adapting to a new place in the family in which provisions and safety can no longer be sufficiently provided; and when looking at religion and security, men discussed their greater reliance on God and the struggles they endure trying to secure a stable living for their families.

In a struggle to meet greater demands with fewer resources, masculinity for Iraqi refugees has come to include the juggling of strife, movement, uncertainty, disparity, restriction, and inaction in order to secure familial survival, all in a foreign land. Redefining masculinity, then, has become nothing less than the struggle for survival.

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Physical insecurity by looking to the government. When we asked him what his ideal form of an Iraqi government would be, he said, “one that restructured the infrastructure and services, and provided safety and security.”

Iraqi refugee families have been torn from lives of relative stability and thrust into lives of total uncertainty in which agency has little meaning. Men seek to provide physical stability and safety to their families, but are unable to do so because of the unstable nature of their conditions. Thus, part of their changing masculinity has included finding ways to deal with the burden of not being able to carry out such responsibilities in their displacement.

Above, this is the government building in which immigration and refugee matters—including deportation—are handled.

Right, this is a group of apartments in Cairo, Egypt. Most refugees live in similar apartments throughout the city. This is a major transition for Iraqi refugees whose living conditions were much different in Iraq.
THE IRAQIS AND BHUTANESE make up less than 3% of the world’s total refugee population. Every minute, eight people are forced to leave their homes for fear of violence or persecution. Solutions to the causes of displacement and the realities of refugee crises are needed on the international, national, and local levels. Though the problems are large, there are realistic opportunities for involvement and influence—some as close as North Carolina, where thousands of refugees are resettled each year.

We have tried to present the realities of refugee lives in our essays. We hope we have shed light on how large, seemingly impersonal processes have had deeply personal effects that individual refugees must confront daily.

While we have used the framework of law and politics to guide our analysis of ethics in refugee policy and practice, our research also reinforced that “refugee issues” influence the daily experiences of millions of individuals around the world. Life story interviews provided glimpses into these individual experiences while illuminating the larger processes of which they are a part. What brings meaning to the lives of refugees came out in their individual stories; we then chose to highlight some stories based on common themes that emerged in our interviews.

The stories from Nepal emphasize shifting community, the strain of resettlement, pride in accomplishments, and intergenerational tensions. Bhutanese refugee camps are held up as models for the rest of the world, and aid organizations working there have been commended for the stability they’ve created over the past twenty years. Still, camp life can be a source of hardship, particularly as refugees struggle with the breakup of camp communities caused by resettlement. Pride—in being able to care for one’s family or to produce something of value on one’s own—is a widely-shared desire across this group, although they differ in the ways they imagine achieving it. One woman opened a shop, while an elderly man believes his dreams can be reached only if he can get back to Bhutan.

The Iraqi stories highlight shifting livelihoods, hopelessness, and the lack of educational opportunities in Cairo. The refugees we spoke to want to continue their educations and support themselves and are frustrated and sad that they have no means to do so. We saw how important it is for them to have a means to use their education and skills, and that many refugees struggle to find any job opportunities at all. We hear the sound of hopelessness fueled by an Egyptian government that expects Iraqi refugees to be self-sufficient, but so restricts their rights as to make this an unattainable goal. Responsibility for family, a potential source of pride, turns into a source of shame as mothers and fathers fret about their inability to pay for schooling, to provide anything, for their children. Each day’s worries build upon those of the day before, and what they once expected to be temporary hardship, a brief interval, has become the story of their lives.

We emerge from this semester of study and engagement prepared to act and to educate, holding in our minds and hearts not just an understanding of refugee issues, but also all of the individual stories—the struggles and the tears, the friends and the children, the violence and the disorder, the rituals and the work—all the things that constitute their lives.
Top: The stories from Nepal emphasize shifting community, the strain of resettlement, pride in accomplishments, and intergenerational tensions. Right: The Iraqi stories highlight shifting livelihoods, hopelessness, and the lack of opportunities in Cairo.
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