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THE EXPERIENCE OF BURMESE REFUGEE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: BLOOMING OUT OF CONCRETE

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THE EXPERIENCE OF BURMESE REFUGEE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

BLOOMING OUT OF CONCRETE

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INTRODUCTION

The United States is the largest refugee resettlement country in the world (UNHCR, 2018). Burmese refugees have been one of the biggest groups resettled in the U.S. 34% of youth around the world go to university. But only around 5 % of refugees globally have enrolled in higher education (UNHCR, 2021).

Focusing on how refugee students in higher education resettled in their host country will be the lens through which we understand how to help newly arrived refugee children and youth with their successful resettlement. This study explored Burmese college refugee students' experiences by examining their resettlement approach and the resources of social support during their life in the U.S. This study aims to be a cornerstone of uncovering refugee students' voices by spotlighting their lives in the United States.

Study Rationale

Refugees are easily labeled as mentally ill and as traumatized victims in western society. Pupavac (2002) criticized the Western therapeutic model as a form of cultural imperialism. However, studies about refugees' mental health using the Western therapeutic model have been continuously published. Refugees' main concerns in their everyday lives are achieving economic independence and regaining the feeling of control over their lives. To avoid considering refugees as victims, this study aimed to explore the role of social support in refugee students' resettlement to represent and understand their experience in the United States

Refugee Resettlement Experiences

Active resettlement	Passive resettlement
Successfully achieving social and emotional well-being and re-creating the feeling that refugees' lives are "back to normal" (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003)	Refugees are treated as if in a sick role and as helpless victims in the host country. Tended to have a negative approach to their migration experience and they did not consider their life as recoverable or as "back to normal" (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

32 Burmese students participated in the study. The participants were also recruited through social network platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Semi structured interviews of Burmese students (N= 32, 84% female, Mean age of study participants when they arrived in the U.S. = 9.5 years old mean age = 21.1) were used for this study.

Demographic Profile (N=32)	n
Age	
18-22 years old	28
23-26 years old	4
Gender	
Female	27
Male	5
Religion	
Christianity	32
Have lived in the United States	
Less than 10 years	7
More than 10 years	25
Classification in college	
Freshman	8
Sophomore	5
Junior	8
Senior	8
Graduate/Professional	3

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted through these processes: In Phase I, the researcher began reading and re-reading the transcripts of individual interviews to familiarize herself with the data. Then, for phase 2, the researcher highlighted the text identifying key words of the text across the entire data set, thus generating initial codes. After generating the initial codes in phase 3, the researcher searched for themes among the codes and gathered all the data related to the potential themes. After searching for themes, the researcher reviewed the themes from phase 3. This is phase 4 – reviewing the themes. After reviewing the themes, the themes were defined and further refined to present through the analysis. In phase 5, the researcher decided whether the themes would be retained or not. After defining and refining the themes, labels were given to each theme for the final analysis. In phase 6, the final analysis was produced as a report with sufficient evidence of the themes across the data set.

RESULTS

Major Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Resettlement challenges and needs	Language barriers
	Cultural differences
	Racism
	Welcome place
Resources of Social support	Educational mentor
	Co-ethnic community support
	Connections with Americans
Resettlement experiences	Blooming flower out of concrete
	A shift from feeling shameful to feeling proud

DISCUSSION

Instead of solely focusing on refugees' mental health or trauma, this study has a purpose to learn more about refugee students' resettlement experiences as members of society to begin and develop their new lives.

This study explored Burmese refugee college students' lived experiences, the role of social support, and their needs and challenges during resettlement.

As cultural and language brokers (Lopez et al., 2022), the participants would play an important role in the Burmese community for newly arrived refugees.

This study continuously delivers this message to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Refugees struggle to have a sense of belonging and social support in the host country. The support from their ethnic group and Americans was critical for refugees to have a sense of belongingness within a different culture. Refugees can play important roles in the host country as a change-maker for their community and family and as a bridge for international relationships. This study revealed not only the resilience of the refugee population but also the strength of this population.

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