

Community Building with Myanmar Refugee Women: Hope for Children

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Overview

- Purpose
- Problem statement
- Historical context
- Reasons of forced migration: Human rights violations
- Background: Myanmar refugees in Dallas, Texas
- Research Design & Research Strategies
- Findings
- Zomi people from Myanmar in Tulsa
- OU Humanitarian Innovation Research Group

Purpose

Collaborative work with Myanmar refugee women (MRW) involving participatory action research for:

- a. Empowering participants to appreciate their cultural assets
- b. Valuing their “Strengths” and “Resiliency”
- c. Advancing a refugee-centered conceptualization of resettlement
- d. Designing refugee-centered resettlement assistance to support MRW’s successful accommodation of a new culture.

Problem Statement

- Biased conceptualization of “resettlement”
- “Resettlement” not perceived or considered as a collective community development among refugees by stakeholders such as policy makers and service providers.
- There is a limitation to a top-down support system.
- Need a bottom-up support system within a resettlement community.

Biased Conceptualization and Top-Down Resettlement Process

- No assessment of assets of refugees
- Omission of refugees' perspectives in the process: service provider focus
- Discourages refugees to become self-sufficient

(Griffiths, Sigona & Zetter, 2006; Valtonen, 1999)

- Paucity of research examining implementation of resettlement services.
- Existing research shows only the roles of stakeholders in the resettlement process.

(Schneider, 2021).

Expectations for Newly Arrived Refugees in the United States

- ◆ American immigration requirements stipulate that refugees become financially self-sufficient less than one year after their arrival, an objective that is too often out of reach for newcomers, especially women migrants.
- ◆ Upon their arrival, they receive medical services and social services for 5 years (vocational, case management, and etc.), but cash assistance is available for only 8 months (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2023).

Refugee Resettlement in TX

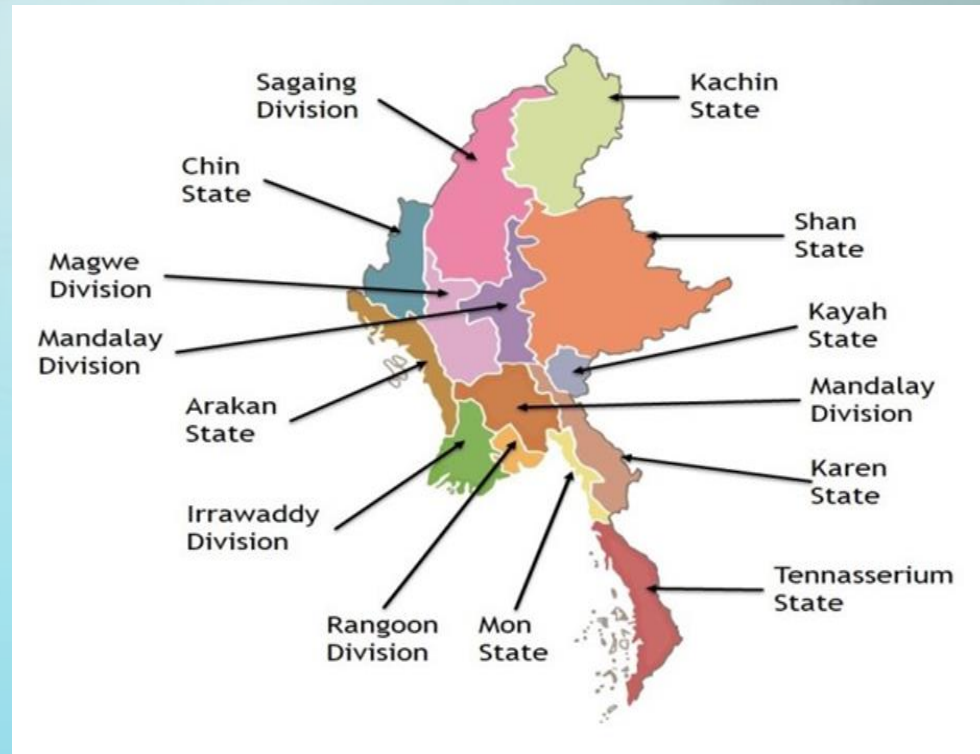
- Texas is one of the top refugee destination states with 2,118 refugees arrived in fiscal year 2022 (Refugee Processing Center, 2022)
- Dallas County is the second most popular resettlement area for refugees within the state of Texas in 2012 (Minora, 2012), and the 11th between 2017 to 2021 (Migration Policy Institute, 2023).
- Among these refugees the top three countries of origin are: 1) Dem. Rep. Congo (34%), 2), Myanmar (10%), and 3) Afghanistan (10%). (Refugee Processing Center, 2022)

Refugees from Myanmar in Texas

- According to Yamaki (2009), Burmese refugees in Greater Dallas are experiencing obstacles with economic, community, educational, and health adaptations.
- A lack of English proficiency: Scant knowledge of systems in the United States, cultural barriers, and lack of self-confidence
- Refugees oftentimes become isolated and marginalized within mainstream communities.

Myanmar Refugees: Ethnic/religious context

- 135 ethnic groups (Burman 68%, Shan 9%, Karen 7%, Rakhine 4%, Chinese 3%, Indian 2%, Mon 2%, other 5%)
- 88% Theravada Buddhism, 6% Christian, 4% Muslim
- A long history of ethnic conflict exacerbated by colonial rule
- 644,000 Myanmar refugees resettled in other countries or internally displaced.



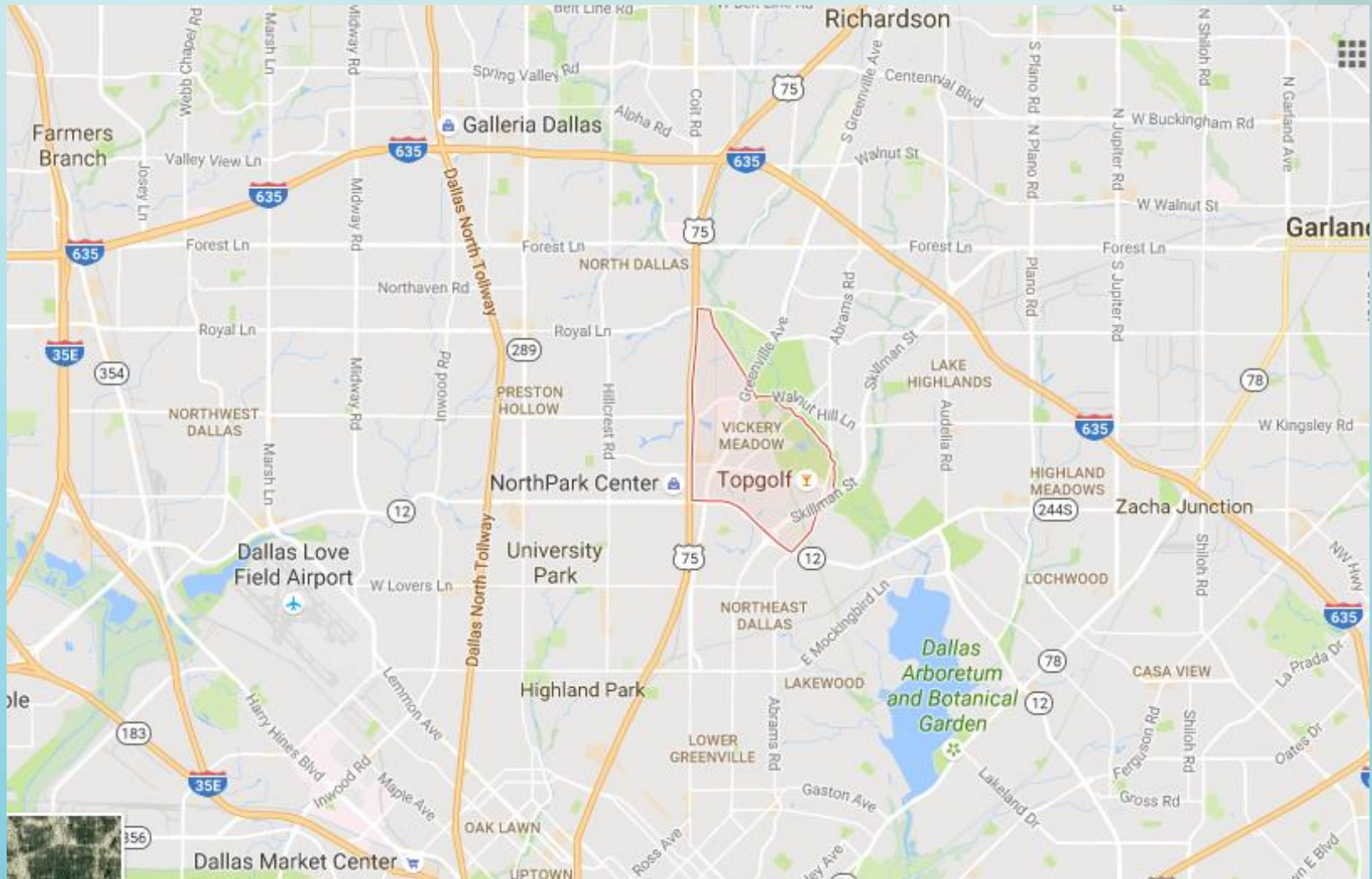
(Central Intelligence Agency, 2023; Maizland, 2023)

Why Did They Leave Myanmar? Human Rights Violations

- Destruction of villages
- Forced migration
- Human trafficking (forced to become soldiers)
- Forced and exploited labor (portering including women, landmine sweep)
- Used as human shields
- Public executions
- Rape & Sexual violence
- Torture, murder, looting

(Karen Women's Organization, 2007)

Study site: the Vickery Meadow in Dallas



Research Design

- Social research and development
- Participatory action research: Needs assessment, assets assessment, a forum, and workshops:

Involvement of participants from the early stage of a project helps empower participants.

Stage 1: Fact Findings Needs/Assets Assessment

- ◆ 5 Focus groups
- ◆ 50 Individual face-to-face interviews
- ◆ 171 Surveys

Results: Celebrate Myanmar Culture and Its Many Ethnicities

- The majority in Texas: Chin, Karen, and Karenii
- Persecuted as Christians or non-Burmese
- The most recent arrival and most persecuted group:
Rohingya (Migration Policy Institute, 2021)
 1. A series of conflicts primarily between ethnic Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims
 2. Stateless: Myanmar & Bangladesh
- Willingness to collaborate within the community:
common language is Burmese

Results: Paths to US

1. Thailand

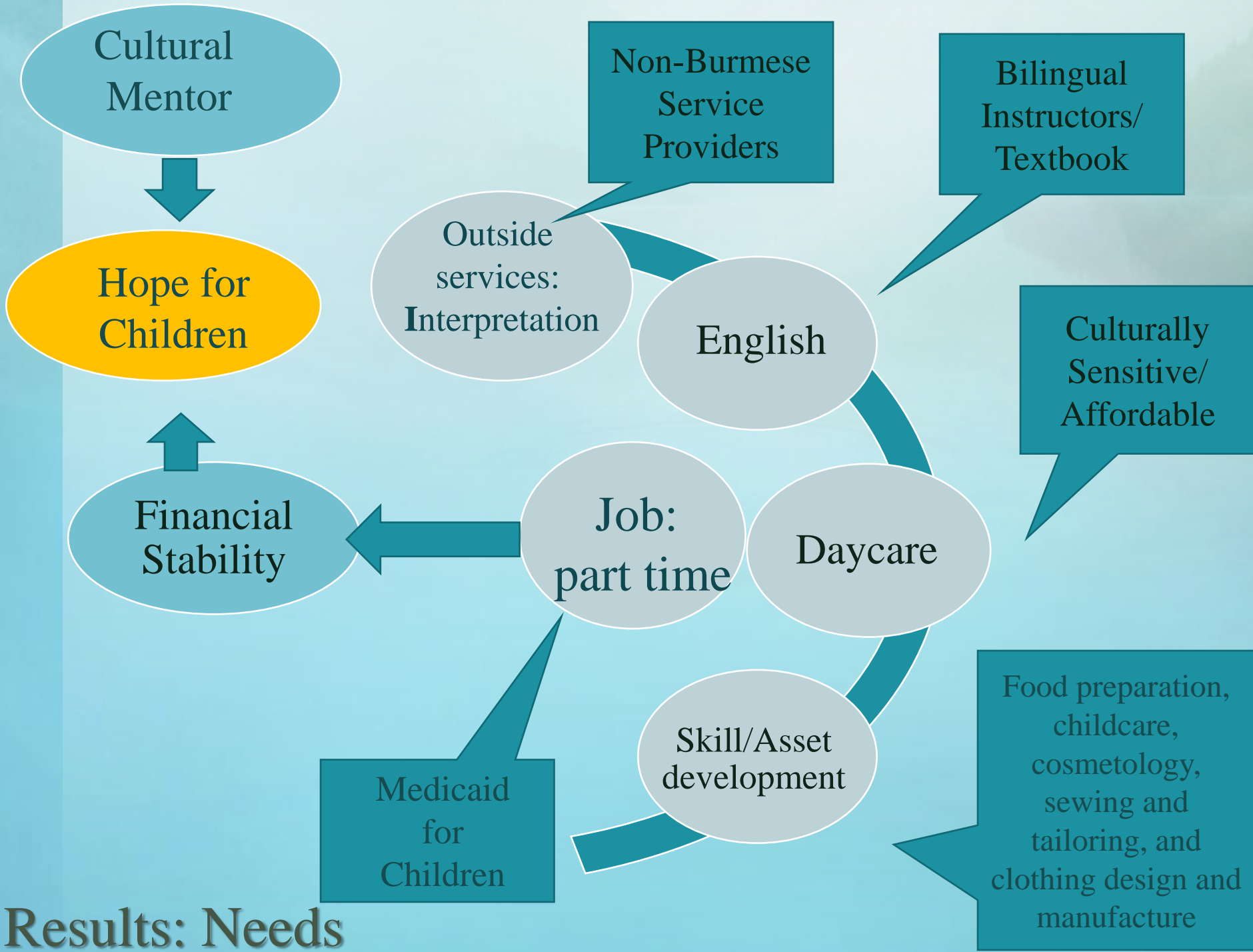
- 9 refugee camps in Thailand
- Karen, Karenii, Shan, and Burmese
- Refugee camp: 10-15 years average
- Fewer opportunities for education



2. Malaysia

- Hakka Chin, Chin-Zontu, Chin-Zomi, Kuda, Rakhain, Rohingya, and others
- Education in Myanmar
- Register at the UNHCR in Malaysia
- Zomi people from Chin state in Tulsa mostly came through Malaysia





Results: Needs

Hope for Children



Results: Strengths

- Support among Myanmar women: Willingness to collaborate among different ethnic groups
- Children's education first
- Willing to learn from Americans but keep their identity as women from Myanmar
- Skills gained in transit countries
- Entrepreneurship



Stage 2: Forum

- The **conceptual** prototype they want to establish in their community
- 50 participants from 9 different ethnic groups gathered in a community center

Results: Myanmar women association & Community center

- The participants want to co-locate employment, childcare, assimilative resources like English language education, and accommodative resources that preserve and celebrate Myanmar culture and its many ethnicities.
- MWR need to be recognized in the community: Make a community center visible in the community
- Aiming to have a reciprocal community
- Not necessarily need to be assimilated: Cultural identification

Social Incubator Stage

Getting the funds to find a place for Myanmar women to meet and grow. (Tulsa & Dallas)

Making available social supports and opportunities Myanmar women want for themselves and their families and their community

Zomi People in Tulsa

- 1970s: Chin Do Kham moved to Tulsa to attend Oral Roberts University. Many Zomi followed Kham in 70s.
- 1990s: 50 Zomi in Tulsa area
- 2007: 500 Zomi's secondary resettlement led by United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.S. State Department.
- Zomi children at Jenks Public Schools.

(Eaton, 2016).

- Current Zomi population: 7,000 – 9,000

(Krishna, 2022)

Intervention: Multidimensional Resettlement Model

Multidimensional Integration

- Employment
- Education
- Health
- Living environment
- Community services (e.g., public libraries)



What Would You Do?

Story of “So May” in Myanmar, Kayin State

- 28-year-old mother
- Karen: Ethnic minority
- Husband is a Karen Christian
Worrier fighting against the
Military Gov.
- Three children (2, 4, and 6 years old)
- Frequent floods
- Farming

What would you do?

- How would you feel if you were told that you were in great danger and had to quickly leave behind your friends, home, the things that belong to you and maybe even some members of your family?
- How would it feel not to know where you were going?
- How would you feel not knowing where your husband is when you are leaving?
- Who would you take with you?
- What would you take with you? List 6 items

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