Weathering the Storm: How Mothers with Refugee Backgrounds Helped Their Children with School During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the experiences of ten women in Canada with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa as they helped their adolescent children (ages 12-18) navigate the challenges of at-home online learning during the global COVID-19 pandemic. We situate our analysis within specific aspects of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework to demonstrate that, while the women's efforts were hampered by online learning technologies, they were able to harness aspirational and familial capital to keep their children engaged in schoolwork. The women felt deeply involved in their children's education, particularly in terms of following up on children's homework, monitoring their activities, and providing guidance.

KEYWORDS: Mothers with refugee backgrounds, Horn of Africa, online learning, COVID-19, community cultural wealth, parental involvement in school

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant educational disruptions as countries around the world closed schools to contain the spread of the virus (OECD, 2020). Canadian evidence suggests a greater impact of school closures on vulnerable populations, including students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, racialized children and youth, newcomers, and students with disabilities (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021; Raby et al., 2021). In Southern Ontario, Canada, lockdowns and school closures occurred intermittently during 2020-2021,

compelling parents to help their children with online education at home. Managing the stress and economic uncertainty associated with the pandemic while keeping children at home and motivated to learn became a significant challenge for a community of women with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa residing in Waterloo, Ontario.

This paper focuses on the experiences of these women as they tried to engage their adolescent children in schoolwork during the pandemic. Our paper is based on a larger study that examined how adolescent children (ages 12-18) with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa and their families coped with at-home schoolwork during the pandemic. Situating our analysis within specific aspects of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, which we outline below, our paper shifts from a longstanding deficit approach to focus on how mothers harnessed the power of aspirational and familial capital to help their teens with at-home learning challenges. We argue that, like most parents during COVID-19, these women struggled to help their adolescent children keep up with schoolwork in an online learning environment. Despite these challenges, the women remained steadfast and deeply involved in their children's schoolwork during the pandemic.

Literature Review

A large body of literature maintains that parental involvement in school is critical to the academic success and future aspirations of their children (e.g., Avnet et al., 2019; Barger et al., 2019; Boonk et al., 2018; Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Although much of the research focuses on primary grades, studies suggest that parental involvement during middle and high school years is especially important because it is during this time that school material becomes more complex and post-secondary education decisions are made (Camacho-Thompson et al., 2016; Gordon & Cui, 2014; Hoover-Demsey, 2011; Jeynes, 2005; Ma et al., 2016; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns highlighted, in particular, the importance of parental support for their adolescent children's learning activities at home (Bonal & González, 2020). Studies conducted prior to the pandemic indicate that homework completion is more likely among students who have a quiet, structured space conducive to studying (Bas et al., 2017). In addition, homework often requires a computer and internet connection, which many students do not have access to outside of school (McLaughlin, 2016); girls are more likely to complete homework than boys (Xu, 2006); and academic performance improves among youth who obtain support through formal homework help programs (Bang, 2011). The studies further suggest that when students do not submit homework assignments, it creates a perception among teachers that the students are low achieving (Snead & Burris, 2016). While some middle and high school students lack motivation to complete their homework, others are constrained by home situations such as poverty, lack of resources and a quiet study environment, or

additional family responsibilities (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). All these factors are relevant to families with refugee backgrounds who may live in poverty.

Although families with refugee backgrounds are not homogenous, many of them face similar challenges that undermine their capacity for effective and sustained partnerships with schools and assistance with schoolwork at home (Ennab, 2017; Georgis et al., 2014; McBrien, 2011). These constraints include long working hours and low-paying and inflexible jobs (Peterson & Ladky, 2007), low levels of education (Bitew & Ferguson, 2010), low language proficiency (McBrien, 2011), and a lack of understanding of the school system (Tadesse, 2014). In addition, studies show that cultural differences between parents, children, and teachers can create confusion about school expectations and pathways to postsecondary education (Ferede, 2010; Kapteijns & Abukar, 2008; Wilson-Forsberg et al., 2019). Families with refugee backgrounds, moreover, may experience racialization within the school system where "white educators have been found to hold negative assumptions about the lives of low-income and working-class families, immigrant families, and families of color and those parents' ability and willingness to support their children's education" (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020, p. 673; see also Cooper, 2003, 2009; James & Turner, 2017). Indeed, the implicit North American expectation of "good parenting" (Thomas et al., 2015) often focuses on child rearing "deficiencies" of refugee parents and, in particular, refugee mothers (Adjei & Minka, 2018; Cranston & Crook, 2020). Refugee mothers are therefore located within a matrix of domination (Collins, 1990) where race, gender, social status, and neighbourhood intersect in ways that stigmatize how and when they interact with schools and support their children's learning.

Community Cultural Wealth

Research often highlights the high ambitions that parents with refugee backgrounds hold for their children's education (Soong et al., 2022), but also demonstrates that their level of involvement in school is low (Bergset, 2017; Cureton, 2020). However, these studies present a single and deficit view of the perceived inaction of these parents in their children's education. Focusing on the deficits of families with refugee backgrounds reproduces education inequities for their children (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Lechuga Peña & Brisson, 2018) and reinforces teachers' beliefs and assumptions about refugees as victims without agency (Kyriakides et al., 2019).

Moving away from the deficit perspective, Bolivar and Chrispeels (2011) and Pushor (2011, 2013) draw a distinction between parental involvement and parental engagement. According to them, "involvement" refers to actions of parents that generally impact a child's school experiences and "engagement" describes their participation on leadership advisory boards and other in-school activities (Pushor, 2011, p. 67). Schools, nevertheless, tend to rely on the latter traditional definition of parental engagement, which is arguably framed by "white

middle-class values around child rearing and sociocultural prevalent practices that tend to restrict the notion of family engagement to school-based activities" (Karsli-Calamak, 2018, p. 44). Schools further take it for granted that students come from homes where parents are functionally literate in the language of the school (Chen, 2021; Daniels, 2020) and they depend on one-way forms of communication whereby information is transmitted to, and requests are made of, parents (Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011). This traditional form of parental engagement often leads to the misconception that minority parents are not involved in their children's schooling (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Howard & Joseph, 2022; Matthiesen, 2015; Roy & Roxas, 2011).

With respect to how culturally and linguistically diverse parents relate to their children's schooling, education experts are calling for more nuanced approaches to family-school partnerships that take account of their own knowledge and resources (Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Larrotta & Yamamura, 2011; Pushor, 2011, 2013; Roy & Roxas, 2011; Szech, 2022). Parents do not have to volunteer for leadership positions or have daily communications with teachers to be involved in their children's schooling. For example, Goodall (2013) maintains that the "greatest lever for children's achievement is parental involvement in their learning in the home and the atmosphere toward learning in the home, including establishing hopes, dreams and expectations with and for their children" (as cited by Pushor & Amendt, 2018, p. 207).

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework emphasizes the under-utilized assets racialized students bring to the classroom from their homes and communities. According to Yosso (2005), community cultural wealth is "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist micro and macro forms of oppression" (p. 77). In this regard, the framework critiques the deficit approach taken by schools that view racialized students as lacking the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed. It is implicit in the literature that parents of racialized children are unable to adequately support their children's education. As a result, schools must provide students with "the forms of knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). Yosso contends that children from racialized families do indeed bring different forms of cultural knowledge to the classroom. However, this knowledge is not valued by the school system (Yosso, 2005). She, in turn, proposes six forms of capital that students of color bring to the classroom. See Table 1 on following page.

Table 1

Yosso's Six Forms of Capital (adapted from Yosso, 2005, p. 78)

Aspirational Capital	ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers
Familial Capital	cultural knowledge nurtured among family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition
Social Capital	a network of people and community resources
Navigational Capital	skills for maneuvering through social institutions that were not created with racialized communities in mind
Linguistic Capital	the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences
Resistant Capital	knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behaviour that challenge inequality

From this framework, we only draw on aspirational and familial capital because the intermittent lockdowns and social distancing restrictions in 2020-2021 hindered the families' abilities to harness the other forms of cultural wealth. For example, the women who participated in our study would have exercised the strong social capital they had built in their community, but the pandemic made it difficult for them to be together in person. They were also preoccupied with their children at home and did not have time to converse with one another over the phone on a regular basis. In our findings, we argue that, despite challenges, mothers with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa can help their children to successfully learn from home. It is in this context that we examined through interviews and focus groups the extent to which these women engaged with their middle and high school-aged children's education at home during COVID-19.

Methods

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic from September 2020 to March 2021, we conducted a qualitative study to assess in real time how families with refugee backgrounds from the Horn of Africa were managing the educational challenges associated with government-mandated lockdowns and social distancing. Specifically, we wanted to understand how middle school (n=13 in Grades 7-8) and high school (n=21 in Grades 9-12) -aged children managed to keep motivated and engaged with schoolwork at home. As the research progressed, we realized that mothers were deeply preoccupied with their adolescent children's schoolwork. This piece of the project forms the basis for this paper.

Our research with mothers involved two focus groups with six women and individual interviews with four women. Six women had refugee backgrounds from

Somalia, one from Ethiopia, and three from Eritrea. We recruited respondents using a snowball sample technique, which involved referrals by our community partner Adventure4Change, a local not-for-profit organization that provides educational and social support to families with refugee backgrounds in Waterloo, Ontario. While the women who participated in our study came from different countries and regions, they share similar refugee backgrounds that made it appropriate for us to discuss their COVID-19 experiences as a group. Most of the interviews were conducted by the second author who specializes in interviewing women who have experienced violence and trauma, and who herself has a refugee background from East Africa. While acknowledging our standpoint as educated and privileged academics, the research team has been meeting and building trust with youth and their mothers at Adventure4Change for the past five years. We harbor a deep respect for their strength and tenacity.

Although the women generally did not know their immigration status upon arrival in Canada, data requested from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) indicated that families resettled from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea between 2011 and 2021 were a mixture of Government-Assisted, Privately Sponsored, and Blended Sponsorship refugees (IRCC, 2022). They were resettled in Waterloo after spending between 10 and 20 years in protracted displacement in the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya. Throughout the 1990s, families in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea were uprooted due to conflict and the collapse of governments (Abdi, 1998). Their children were confined in camps where they had limited access to education beyond primary grades (Mwoma & Chege, 2021). Three decades later, these children are adults raising their own children in receiving countries (Daniels, 2020). At the time of interviews, the ten women had been in Canada for an average of five years. Most had several children, three of the women worked part-time, and all but four had a husband who worked outside the home.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Following Research Ethics Board clearance and adhering to strict COVID-19 protocols from our universities, focus groups were conducted in-person at the Adventure4Change Community Hub and the personal interviews were conducted over the phone when the Community Hub was abruptly forced to close due to government-mandated social distancing. We asked the same questions in both individual and group interviews. However, while the women could interpret for one another in the focus groups, the phone conversations were done without an interpreter beyond fragments of language brokering provided by children in the background. The interviews were therefore constrained by a language barrier and general discomfort around speaking over the phone without resorting to other forms of communication such as hand gestures. Questions included: What concerns do you have with school being delivered online? How much time do your children spend doing schoolwork each day? How do you communicate with

teachers? Do your children have a scheduled or structured day at home? What did your family's daily routine look like before the pandemic? How has that routine changed?

Data Analysis

The focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We analyzed the transcripts by hand beginning with "open" coding whereby many descriptive codes were gathered and labelled without committing to any as core codes. This first stage of coding largely revealed the challenges associated with schooling during the pandemic. We then "coded on" in more detail by linking emerging codes with other codes and categories and identifying emerging patterns and themes in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second stage of coding revealed the women's coping skills. It was only after a third attempt at coding that we concluded that these women were using aspirational and familial capital to help their children with schoolwork.

Language barriers also caused significant challenges to how we would ordinarily present direct quotations in an academic paper. Therefore, we have only edited the direct quotations to make them legible. Since we wanted the women's voices to be as authentic as possible, some direct quotations will have grammatical errors. Upon synthesizing our interpretations of the interview data, two key themes emerged: School-at-Home Challenges and the Harnessing of Aspirational and Familial Capital by mothers to confront these challenges.

Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many Canadian families to self-isolate by staying home. As schools shut down, the pandemic fundamentally changed the education landscape with an unprecedented rise in e-learning (teaching remotely and on digital platforms). Online school caused a number of challenges for the women who participated in our study, including access to computers and Internet, a lack of space in the home, and difficulties communicating with teachers.

School-at-Home Challenges

Ontario, like most Canadian provinces, switched to digital pedagogical tools and virtual communication between students and their teachers and among students to deliver curriculum while schools remained closed. As schools moved online, access to communication technologies became a necessity. Digital learning tools and management systems (e.g., Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams) became the primary means of delivering content. Although most

elementary and middle school students in the Waterloo Region District School Board were not provided with computers, the school board ensured that high school students (grades 9-12) who needed computers were loaned Chromebooks to complete schoolwork at home. Chromebooks are described as “budget laptops that do not run Mac OS, Linux, or Windows, and instead operate on a Google-based operating system called Chrome OS” (https://www.parallels.com/tips/chromebook-vs-laptop/). However, some of the mothers who participated in our study struggled with the uneven distribution of Chromebooks. For example, they lamented that the rollout of the Chromebooks was slow when the school year began in September 2020, resulting in a long wait for access.

This backlog resulted in siblings having to share the Chromebooks, as reported by Participant 1:

> Some kids don’t have a Chromebook. The high school didn’t have enough and asked kids in the same house to share. One of my boys is in grade 10 but he didn’t get the Chromebook yet. He needs to wait until his brother finishes so he can do his schoolwork. But sometimes their classes are happening at the same time online, and one has to miss class. My girl waits until Saturday to do her schoolwork on the Chromebook, but the teacher makes the due date on Saturday and her work is often late.

High school-aged children also shared their Chromebooks with younger siblings who were still in middle and elementary school and did not have access to the technology through their schools:

> I have a girl. She just started Grade 7. She has a lot of homework, but she doesn’t have a Chromebook. Her sister helps her work too. It is complicated to share one computer when their classes are at the same times. I am worried. A little bit stressed, I say, for me. (Participant 4)

Internet access was another challenge. In many cases, the Wi-Fi was too weak or unstable to support multiple children working online at the same time. Mothers reported that if one child was in class, siblings had to stay off the Internet. The youngest children had to refrain from Internet use altogether. Balancing the need for devices and the Internet between children added stress for mothers, especially those who had children in elementary, middle, and high school.

Shared space was also problematic. The women we interviewed had large families living in small, crowded spaces. These arrangements not only made isolating for illness highly impractical, but they also posed a challenge for learning at home. A dedicated learning space, with device access, reliable Internet, and uninterrupted time to focus on schoolwork is an assumed circumstance many of the children did not have and which mothers could not provide, as Participant 2 indicated:

> My kids cannot sit at home. They do schoolwork online, but there is nowhere to sit. The teachers said every kid has [to have] one chair and table like school. And how do you buy all the kids a chair and table if you have 5, 6,

> 7 kids going to school? They say you have to buy chair. Right now, they cannot sit. The room is crowded and noisy so they cannot study.

In addition to the lack of space for the children to learn, mothers were stressed and frustrated because they did not have enough time to help all their children with schoolwork, especially those in high school whose work and time commitments were more demanding.

Three women worked part-time outside the home, while seven were stay-at-home mothers. All the mothers interviewed were the primary caretakers, dedicating most of their time to household chores with little or no help from their husbands. Refugee displacement impacts traditional family dynamics and systems. Research shows that refugee men struggle to adjust to their roles as husbands and fathers in resettlement countries (Young & Chan, 2015), exhibiting patriarchal norms with clear gendered divisions of labour. In this space of struggle and change, women become the primary support system for their families as caregivers enacting traditional domestic labour roles:

> Participant 5: Home it is me only (chuckles). All the cleaning, cooking (sighs). I do it every time. Me only. Not my husband. African men, he don't do this.... housework. He don't wash dishes. He don't know how to vacuum. (Chuckles). I bring him food. I bring him coffee. I make him special coffee. He comes. He sleeps, he eats. He goes work. (Interviewer chuckles.) I make food. He leaves. (Both chuckle.)
>
> Participant 3: Yeah. Before the kids were in school and I did housework... little bit little bit. I could take time to be with my neighbours. But now, all the kids are at home, and I have more cooking and cleaning (inaudible, taps table). No. It is very difficult.

This conversation may be more significant for what was unspoken than spoken. The nervous laughter and table tapping are likely coping mechanisms displayed by the two women who were out of their element and unsure of themselves.

The women also used body language as a way of showing the interviewer (who is also an African woman) that “they were all in this together.” The pandemic left them feeling isolated, frustrated with multiple children to assist with school, housework, childcare, and cooking. The women, traditionally, come from large families with extensive support from extended family members. The collectivist family organization and structure have been destroyed by conflict and violence and the process of seeking refugeehood. In resettlement countries, many of the women have little support at home as they provide labour and care for large families (on average the families have 7–10 children) with limited financial support. As they provide spaces for their families to thrive in Canada, their own health and wellbeing are mostly ignored and, during the pandemic, the women struggled. As noted by Participant 2:

> Yeah. Really, I am worried because if COVID-19 keeps doing this, we'll all just be in the house. To be in the house is not easy. It comes with a lot of extra work. When you have so many kids, you have to release some your

> headache somewhere else. But right now, everything is closed; everything is shut down and there is no where you can go...

Overall, the women's transcripts indicate a sense of being overwhelmed with the added caregiver burdens and pressures leaving them with persistent stress and anxiety surrounding COVID-19.

This anxiety was confounded by the dual roles that three of the mothers played in supporting their families economically during COVID-19. For example, Participant 4 stated the following:

> Well, I work in the afternoon, right, so... I leave here about one something... When I return at night the whole house is like a volcano, so like (laughs deeply) there is no mum to say "stop", right? And the oldest one is busy on games and stuff... so yeah it was really, really tough.

Furthermore, even though the daughters were busy with schoolwork, most of them were also kept busy with household chores, as well as supporting their siblings with their schoolwork:

> Participant 3: The girls, the older ones, they help me with the cooking and cleaning. The boys don't help. Boy takes out the garbage, that's all. The girls do their schoolwork. They are good daughters.

Finally, the mothers reported struggling to engage with their children's schools in a remote online environment. Before the pandemic, the women would meet with teachers and school officials in person, often with the support of an interpreter and our community partner organization, Adventure4Change, which seeks to bridge refugee families and schools. However, during the pandemic, the schools relied on email as the primary means of communication. All but three mothers reported that they did not have enough English language literacy to respond to the emails.

As demonstrated in the focus group conversation below, the lack of communication resulted in the mothers not knowing what their children were learning, especially at the high school level where the curriculum is more complicated:

> Participant 1: It's difficult. We don't see the teachers now. We don't meet for high school. (Chuckles.) We don't know what is going on. Yeah.
>
> Participant 2: No meeting. Only online, everywhere. (Speaks Arabic.)
>
> Participant 1: Yeah. No talking. Very difficult.
>
> Participant 2: A lot of homework we can't help with. Yeah.
>
> Participant 1: Yeah. We need help. We don't know what they (teenaged children) are doing.

Teachers communicated over email, which was difficult for most of the mothers. Even if they had received help reading and understanding the e-mails, they could not send a written reply. In this regard, the mothers reported a preference for the teachers to speak with them on the phone or leave voice messages that could be

replayed. While the women understood the necessity of the lockdowns, they expressed concerns about not meeting with the teachers face to face.

Their body language and shift between English and Arabic showed this frustration:

> Participant 1: It's difficult that we don't have a way to see the teachers. We can't meet with them at the high school. (Chuckles.) We don't know what is going on. Yeah.
>
> Participant 2: No meeting. No meeting. Only online, everywhere. (Speaks Arabic.)

The women connected lack of in-person teacher meetings with lack of knowledge about their children's academic work. While language was always a barrier for them, the women still preferred in-person teacher meetings. They were unable to communicate with their children's teachers or help their children with homework in a language they could understand. In this respect, school practices worked to disempower them during their attempted interactions with the school system (Olivos & Lucero, 2020).

In short, while the women clearly wanted to help their children succeed, they did not have all the necessary resources and skills to achieve this outcome. However, by talking through the above challenges, the ten women were also unknowingly demonstrating how they harnessed the power of their aspirational and familial capital to help their adolescent children with schoolwork at home. While these forms of capital often go unrecognized by schools, they were important during the pandemic, as we demonstrate in the following sections.

Aspirational Capital

According to Yosso (2005), "aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). This is shown through acts by parents that encourage their children to dream big and maintain high aspirations for the future. Moving education online was exceptionally difficult for the women in this study, especially when combined with language barriers. Our findings indicate that the abrupt shift from in-person to online home school negatively impacted the women's ability (and even more so their confidence in their ability) to communicate with teachers and help their adolescent children with schoolwork. Nevertheless, it is evident from the interviews and focus groups that these women valued education and wanted their children to do well academically.

Schoolwork, postsecondary education, and future careers were consistent topics of conversation in these households and the women cared about their children's overall success in life. Participant 4, for example, acknowledged her low literacy as a barrier but still managed to monitor her children's schoolwork:

> Ahhh... for me, I can't help... I didn't go to school back home, and when I came here, I didn't go to school either. I no read well, so I don't help to read it [the schoolwork] to them. But I do help. I tell them please do it, and please, you know, you have to focus on school. School is important. You need to study and work hard to get a good job someday.

The women constantly asked their adolescent children about class content and school activities but reported that communication was often limited. Some of the women felt self-conscious and frustrated that they could not keep up with the school content themselves and reported anxiety about their adolescent children's technology use, especially their time on social media and playing video games during school hours. As noted by Participant 4:

> When they are in high school, if they need help, they don't ask. When you ask about schoolwork, they say: "We're okay, we do it, we do it." They don't tell you [the] truth sometimes. And you have to know what your kid is doing in school. How are they doing? Good or not? Maybe they need help. Maybe they don't need it. You need to know what is going on. They need to do well in school…. Now, you don't know English, you don't know what they are working [on]. You can't read the information given by the teachers and you don't understand what is on the computer....

With almost all educational content online rather than in textbooks, the women were never sure if their children were actually completing schoolwork or distracted by their computers.

However, the agency and capacity of these women to make their own decisions and help their children remained evident in the value they placed on education, as demonstrated in the following conversation:

> Participant 1: The curriculum book. My friend took me to Costco, and I saw one and bought it.
>
> Interviewer 2: The curriculum book, yeah. (Whisper: "But do you know the content?")
>
> Participant 1: No, but I pretend I know it. I give my kids the book, and I say... "Learn this." Yeah. I give them twenty minutes to do each lesson in the book. I time it. They think I know [the content], but I don't. Instead, I take the answer pages in the back of the book, and I keep it. When I check, I look at answers (Interviewer 1 chuckles)… and make sure they got it right.

This is an example where a mother, just like many parents during the pandemic, was attempting to retain authority and control amid the chaos and frustration of having to help her children learn from home. Even though she did not have the skills, technological knowhow, and confidence to read and understand the curriculum guide herself, she exhibited agency and creativity by pretending to know. One of the duties of parents during the pandemic was to provide their children with reassurance and optimism that everything would be okay, and this often involved pretending that they knew what was going on. The women also reported buying new or used Chromebooks for younger children who did not

receive one from the school or allowing children to do schoolwork online on the parents' cell phones. They also scheduled computer and Internet time and posted the schedule on walls so as not to overload the Wi-Fi bandwidth.

Familial Capital

Familial capital refers to "cultural knowledge nurtured through family, which may include immediate family (living or long passed on) and extended family that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). In this study, familial capital was demonstrated by how mothers were able to maintain a healthy connection with their adolescent children and create a context for learning at home during the pandemic. The mothers shouldered the burden of transmitting familial capital because the other channels through which familial capital is fostered (i.e., aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, and role models) could not be accessed in-person.

During the pandemic, there were no sports, religious gatherings, or access to other community social settings through which familial capital is usually transmitted (Yosso, 2005). With mosques and other religious settings closed, some of the mothers took on the role of supervising religious observance and keeping their children on schedule in busy crowded households by making sure they prayed at dawn and read the Koran. When discussing the importance of school with their adolescent children, the women told stories of how their own education was limited in the refugee camps and the pandemic was just one more challenge to overcome:

> COVID is hard. My boys have difficult time on the computer all day. But I tell them they must focus and do their work. My oldest remembers Kenya. In Kenya he can only finish primary levels no more. Here school is free. He can keep going then maybe be an electrician. I tell them that when I was little and their dad was little, we had to work. There was no time to play video games or have boredom in Somalia. (Participant 8)

Consistent with Roy's and Roxas's (2011) study with Somali Bantu refugee families in the United States, the women stressed the high value they placed on education through their storytelling practices in the home that relayed past struggles, including experiences of violence and poverty. The stories told and advice given to their adolescent children showed an embedded value of education within the community and serve as a counter-story to the way in which refugee families from the Horn of Africa tend to be viewed by the majority of their teachers (Roy & Roxas, 2011).

Cooking together was another theme noted by the women. Daughters spent more time in the kitchen with their mothers, cooking meals. By making time to impart these skills to the girls, mothers and daughters could have conversations and relieve the stress and boredom of staying at home. While this meant a lot of responsibility for the girls (they were also doing housework and looking after

younger siblings while completing schoolwork), it was a mechanism for them to channel their energies towards things that were positive, bringing a sense of maturity. From our interviews, the women said that they were able to engage with the girls but they had a hard time with the boys who felt more isolated and unmotivated, in part because their sports were cut off, but they also lacked father figures to motivate them along. As reported by Participant 4:

> Boys don't say much. I ask about school and friends, but they don't say much. My older girl tells me about the book she is reading in school and how her teacher helps her when she has questions. She is okay at home. My boys want to play basketball. Sometimes they go outside and play but there isn't many people outside and now it is too cold… My husband is at work. When he comes home, he is tired. He doesn't talk much.

While not touched on in detail by the women, we are aware from interviews with the youth, that the girls performed academically better than the boys while at home during the pandemic. They continued to submit their assignments and their grades remained largely unchanged. This is despite (or perhaps even because) of increased domestic and childcare burdens placed on the girls. They spent more time with their mothers cooking, talking, and learning about their family culture and history.

Finally, the older children helped their mothers with interpreting and reading correspondence from the school:

> Interviewer: Are you able to ask teachers about schoolwork at home?
>
> Participant 5: No, not that much. I am still learning my English. That's why my son is helping me talk to his teacher. He helps. He knows my language so sometimes when I didn't understand I ask in my language and my son tells the teacher in English.

Interwoven with children's language brokering was siblings helping siblings with schoolwork and as caregivers as an important strategy to manage school at home:

> The older ones are looking after the youngest ones. I do help the younger ones. I sit down with them and help to explain the work if I can. Then my older girl helps them to settle and gets them ready for the teacher to speak with them on the computer to... help them. To settle, to get them ready for the teacher. (Participant 4)

Indeed, we found that most mothers used their children's more advanced language skills as an adaptive strategy. This was particularly effective for mothers during the pandemic because, while the literature suggests that role reversal (the child provides the support and the parent becomes the dependent) can undermine parental authority (Suarez-Orozco & Qin Hillard, 2004), mothers felt that their children developed a sense of responsibility and purpose in the family that helped them weather through the COVID-19 isolation.

Discussion and Limitations

The ten women who participated in our study had to navigate the challenges of helping their children learn from home, as well as keeping them safe from the virus. While these challenges were prevalent before COVID-19 (Cranston & Crook, 2020), they were exacerbated by the sudden shift to online learning during the pandemic (Ogundari, 2023). Consistent with the growing body of literature on educational pathways of refugees, the women faced language barriers that made communication with teachers through email virtually impossible (Chen, 2021; Karsli-Calamak, 2018). Also consistent with the literature, the women described interrupted or no access to formal education as a barrier to assisting their adolescent children with schoolwork (Roy & Roxas, 2011; Shakya et al., 2010; Stermac et al., 2012). Our findings also support studies on the gendered effects associated with the pandemic that disproportionately affected mothers with the burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities (Guruge, 2021). While we aim to focus on fathers in future research, the fathers in this research were not involved in their children's schoolwork and did not partake in Adventure4Change's programming. Finally, our findings are consistent with research on girls' homework completion and educational outcomes (Xu, 2006) in that daughters completed schoolwork and got through the pandemic with their grades intact moreso than sons.

Borrowing from Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, we identified two forms of capital used by the women to assist their adolescent children with schoolwork at home that were not prioritized by educators: aspirational and familial. Although the women's transcripts were not detailed enough to refer to aspirational and familial capital as protective factors, we contend that, in a time of crisis when families were cut off from schools and community, these forms of capital helped maintain order and reduce stress. Three other forms of capital (social, navigational, and resistant) held deep potential for these families. However, the pandemic weakened the capital by cutting families off from one another and from social supports. The periodic lockdowns also hindered our collection of data, resulting in transcripts from in-person focus groups being more detailed than those collected from phone interviews.

Despite these limitations, our findings challenge Canadian concepts of parental involvement and the social integration of children into the school system. Mothers with refugee backgrounds are not often given opportunities to share their experiences. By including the voices of these women, our paper offers a more inclusive understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on families. The women provided important insights on the challenges associated with managing, motivating, and engaging with their adolescent children's schoolwork at home and how they were able to harness their own cultural wealth to weather these challenges. They clearly struggled with helping their children academically and were not fully engaged with schools in the online environment. However, they still felt deeply involved in their children's education, particularly in terms of following-up on children's homework, monitoring their activities, and providing support and

guidance. Yet, at times, it seemed that their children were struggling with online learning at home despite the mothers' efforts and desires.

Conclusion

Education is a tool of integration into Canadian society for newly settled youth and their families. However, our findings suggest that education policies normalize Western perceptions of parental involvement in school in ways that marginalize refugee mothers. Most of the women who participated in our study do not have the educational background or the competencies that Canadian schools desire to support their children's education (Daniels, 2020). The women's history of protracted displacement in refugee camps resulted in limited access to education opportunities and this experience extends to their children as well. Protracted situations are a global phenomenon, but many of these situations happen in Africa (UNHCR, 2022). The numbers indicate that more than five million African refugees live in protracted situations. Context is important. The vast majority of African refugees resettled in Canada have pre-resettlement experiences of living in refugee camps in low-income countries. The educational experiences of both the mothers and their children are constituted within this context. The result is intergenerational educational vulnerabilities in resettlement countries like Canada. Nonetheless, as this paper demonstrates, these mothers used their own array of knowledge, skills, and abilities to engage with their children's education during COVID-19. The mothers were committed to protecting and supporting their children so they could stay on track in spite of COVID-19 challenges. The centrality of family and community rooted in the hope of rebuilding fractured lives was important for the mothers.

This study has two important implications for educational policy and practice. The first is that it challenges the traditional view that racialized parents with refugee backgrounds are uninvolved in their children's education. Moving ahead, school systems must realize that most parents are involved at home. However, they may use forms of capital that are not recognized by schools. Second, policymakers and practitioners need to be aware that, during a crisis like COVID-19, mothers (and in the case of this population, daughters) disproportionately carry the burden of caring for children and the home. More supports need to be offered to women as we move forward post COVID-19.

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