

Challenging Our Assumptions: Listening to Refugee and Immigrant Women's Voices About Career Aspirations

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Abstract

The St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry in upstate New York serves refugees and immigrants who have recently arrived in the United States. These newcomers face significant barriers to obtaining economic stability. Those who secure a job usually work in low-paying, entry-level positions such as food service, hospitality, or cleaning. A group of community volunteers and representatives from immigrant-serving agencies was formed to better understand the needs and career aspirations of refugees and immigrants who are served at the food pantry. We conducted three focus groups and one interview with 26 immigrant and refugee women from Afghanistan, Congo-Brazzaville, the Dominican Republic, Iraq, Syria, Trinidad and Tobago, and Ukraine. Participants expressed ambitious career goals such as becoming a lawyer, nurse, judge, police officer, doctor, tailor, and chef. These findings show that community volunteers and representatives should not fall into the trap of low expectations. Instead, we recommend that newcomers' ambitious career aspirations are heard by community volunteers, that they are given a realistic preview of the work and commitment involved, and that they are provided with resources and support to pursue their desired careers. We share two case studies that highlight the difficult employment barriers that newcomers face as well as career successes from our community. These narratives both illustrate the many challenges faced by newcomers and exemplify how community volunteers can help immigrants overcome these challenges to pursue their career aspirations.

St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry is on the front lines serving the immigrant and refugee population in Albany, New York. Albany, with a population of under 100,000, is the state capital and a midsize city in Upstate New York. While the region has a long history of people arriving from other countries—starting as a very early Dutch settlement and welcoming waves of Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—only in Albany's relatively recent past have non-Europeans come to call the city their home (Grondahl, 2016). In the 1970s, Albany saw an influx of Vietnamese families after the fall of Saigon, and in the 1980s, the city welcomed Jews escaping oppression in the last days of the Soviet Union. A notable change in Albany's history came in 2005 when the U.S. federal government designated this city as an official refugee resettlement location.

Over these past 17 years, more than 5,000 people have come to Albany through the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (Moench & Crowley, 2018). Through the resettlement process, refugees have come from a variety of countries, especially Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Myanmar,

and Syria (Stacker, 2022). In addition, Albany is now home to clusters of families and individuals who come from Central and South America, Haiti, and various African and Asian countries. A telling indicator of Albany's current demographics is found in public school district statistics. Twelve percent of Albany School District students are relatively recent arrivals from other countries, and these students together speak 40 languages other than English (Bump, 2018).

The church of St. Vincent de Paul is a Roman Catholic parish community in which members are committed to serving Jesus Christ through acts of courageous hospitality. The St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry is the largest food pantry in Albany County and has served immigrants as well as the working poor, college students, and seniors since 1983. The pantry uses a client choice model in which guests shop and choose their own foods. The food pantry is centrally located in downtown Albany, and it provides home delivery for guests unable to shop in person and bus passes for those who lack transportation. In the latter part of 2015, the food pantry's service level increased 8% due to the influx of immigrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Central America.

Not only did the newcomers face obstacles, but the food pantry volunteers and staff serving newcomers also shared common challenges: unfamiliar languages and cultures, different belief systems, and food that was not culturally relevant to the people served. For example, some cultural foods, such as halal foods, were not attainable at the regional food bank. Most of the immigrants served in the pantry were women with children and no male head of household, since many men had been killed or disabled in civil wars (e.g., Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq) or had been separated from their families during evacuations. Some families relied on their adult sons as primary breadwinners, which sometimes led to conflicts within the families regarding how to spend their earned income. Some families had little education (e.g., some used a pencil to sign their names with an “X”). This reality meant that these newcomers would face barriers to obtaining economic stability.

In response and in order to identify the best strategies to help the newcomers, the St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church convened a group of community volunteers and representatives from immigrant-serving agencies. This meeting built on an existing network of support: the Refugee and Immigrant Roundtable. Since 2012, the Refugee and Immigrant Roundtable has brought together over 600 individuals and organizations in the Capital District focused on helping refugees and immigrants. Participants meet every two months, often with over 50 representatives in attendance, resulting in collaborative opportunities among community volunteers, educators, and partners.

The St. Vincent de Paul effort described in the current paper is one such collaboration; the four authors on this paper connected through the Refugee and Immigrant Roundtable and brought unique perspectives and backgrounds. Included are a community member who codirects the Refugee and Immigrant Roundtable (Herring), a community partner employee who directs the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry (Warner), a community volunteer who mentors refugee families (Coles), and a faculty member at the University at Albany, SUNY (Baranik). Herring brings extensive knowledge of the local refugee and immigrant communities as well as the organizations and volunteers who support these groups. Warner has directed the food pantry at St. Vincent for 10 years and has developed trust and rapport with many immigrant and refugee women, which was instrumental for facilitating data collection. Coles has formed close, deep

relationships with the refugee families she mentors and has in-depth knowledge of the challenges refugees and immigrants face in our community. Finally, Baranik brings experience in qualitative data collection, analysis, and research methods.

Members of the Immigrant and Refugee Roundtable identified a pressing need: a lack of effective pathways for immigrant and refugee women to achieve economic stability. Observations in our own community by the authors and by community leaders Warner, Hoxha, LaFache-Brazier, Noorzai, and Ezeizat (2019) mirrored those found in the academic literature about the economic challenges that immigrants face. Specifically, we observed that women immigrants struggled to speak English and meet other basic qualifications for jobs (Baranik et al., 2018), had difficulty meeting basic needs (e.g., transportation, housing, access to childcare, heat, food, clothing; Gallagher et al., 2021), suffered poor mental and physical health (Dhalimi et al., 2018), were perceived as threatening by some people living in the community (Esses, 2021), were discriminated against (Cheung et al., 2022), and were exploited in employment contexts (Knappert et al., 2018). Our ultimate goal was to improve economic outcomes by helping these women obtain one of the many attainable jobs that immigrants and refugees secure in the Capital District, such as hotel housekeeping or food service. However, in deciding a path forward, the team wanted to hear from the immigrant women themselves to better understand their career preferences and goals, hopes, and dreams for their futures.

Method and Results

We conducted three focus groups and one interview with 26 immigrant and refugee women living in the Albany Capital Region. One participant was originally scheduled to attend a focus group but had to leave early, so she was interviewed separately. The women came from seven different countries: Afghanistan (18), Congo-Brazzaville (1), the Dominican Republic (1), Iraq (2), Syria (2), Trinidad and Tobago (1), and Ukraine (1). The large percentage of Afghan participants stemmed from the large influx of refugees who arrived in the United States during this time period due to the war in Afghanistan. Convenience sampling was used. Each member was recruited from the food pantry and given \$50 to a local grocery store for their participation. One focus group was conducted in English, one in Dari, and one in Arabic.

All participants were asked, “Now that you have been in the United States for some time, what hopes do you have for the future?” and “Imagine yourself five years from today. What career goals do you hope to have achieved by then?” Fifteen women (44%) discussed their career plans, seven (21%) described wanting to receive an education, five (15%) wanted to improve their English language skills, four (11%) wanted to volunteer, two (6%) were focused on their children’s education, and one (3%) expressed a desire to improve lives.

Direct quotations regarding participants’ hopes and dreams for the future are presented in Table 1. The women’s career ambitions far exceeded the low-wage jobs that we had initially assumed they wanted. It is important to note that our belief that the women would be satisfied with low-wage jobs was based on what we thought was achievable. Most of these women do not speak English, do not have transportation or childcare, do not have a supportive partner at home, and come from cultures in which women are not the traditional breadwinners. Moreover, the U.S. welfare system and refugee resettlement policies require that these women become economically self-sufficient within 6 months of arrival, which does not allow enough time for the training and

development necessary to pursue ambitious career goals (Wehrle et al., 2018). Despite these challenges, the women expressed desires to become lawyers, nurses, judges, police officers, doctors, tailors, and chefs. Other hopes and dreams included going to college, getting a job that pays well, being good citizens, and spending time with their families. To shed light on the challenges that refugee and immigrant women face when pursuing careers, we share two case studies below.¹

The Story of Khudeeja

Khudeeja and her family fled Afghanistan after the Taliban came into their village looking for women and things to steal. They murdered her husband and burned down her house. Khudeeja, her mother-in-law, and her four children escaped to Pakistan, where they all lived in a one-room dwelling. After a 13-step vetting process (e.g., demonstrating eligibility and completing prescreening interviews, background checks, biometric and biographic checks, security checks, and medical exams), Khudeeja and her family arrived in the United States in 2015. Khudeeja’s four children attend public school and are learning English. Khudeeja’s family receives some public assistance, but that funding will eventually

Table 1. Selected Example Quotations

“I want to join the police force. I was very interested to become police in Afghanistan as well, but the circumstances didn’t give me the chance. As soon as my children grow up, I will start school and serve in the police force.”
“I hope to be employed in a hospital as a nurse five years from today.”
“I really love tailoring and want to be a professional tailor five years from now.”
“I want to work in state, become a lawyer, and finally become a judge.”
“I want to be a doctor, because it was my dream from childhood when I start my school in my country.”
“My dream is that one day I will be able to speak English like my teacher, and I want to go to college and study.”
“My goal is to go to college and study psychology.”
“I am trying to merge and integrate with the society and have improved life, I want to have good job with higher pay, I want to be a good chef.”
“I hope my children have good future, since I am not able to do something else at this age.”

Note. Selected quotations from focus groups conducted with women immigrants and refugees. Participants were asked, “Now that you have been in the U.S. for some time, what hopes do you have for the future?” and “Imagine yourself five years from today. What career goals do you hope to have achieved by then?”

¹Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

be phased out. The U.S. government provided Khudeeja with some financial support but expected her to find a job within 6 months of arrival.

The cultural norms of Khudeeja's native country dictate her main priority: to care for her frail and failing mother-in-law. This elder caregiving responsibility creates challenges for Khudeeja as she seeks to be available for steady employment and to improve her English. Khudeeja's family experiences are characteristic of many refugee families: single female head of household, low English language proficiency, little education (e.g., may be illiterate in their native language), and beholden to traditional cultural norms, especially regarding women engaging in work outside the home.

Khudeeja's experiences of trauma, language barriers, education, and cultural expectations to prioritize caretaking over working outside the home present many challenges to achieving paid work. The immigrants and refugees that St. Vincent serves all face similar barriers. Yet despite these barriers, over the past few years, we have seen immigrant and refugee women achieve ambitious careers. Our observation has been that these success stories occur when women are given considerable support and resources to overcome the many challenges they face, often in the form of close mentoring relationships provided by family, friends, community organizations, and community volunteers. Next, we share the case study of Fatima.

The Story of Fatima

Fatima is a Syrian woman who arrived in the United States as a refugee in 2016 along with her husband, Ahmad, and their five children, who ranged in age from 3 to 10 years old at the time. The family settled in Albany, New York, and was assisted by a local nonprofit organization offering resources to settle Syrian refugees. Fatima is a guest of the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry. When asked about her hopes and dreams, she replied, "I only want a better life for my children." Fatima and other newcomers who frequented the food pantry were very grateful and often gifted volunteers with homemade desserts and sometimes a meal. The director of the local Syrian resettlement nonprofit organization learned that Fatima had a special talent for preparing delicious food reflecting the region of Syria where she grew up. Fatima was encouraged to consider starting a catering business to supplement the small income generated by her husband. She and Ahmad carefully considered this opportunity. While Ahmad initially expressed

opposition, with some encouragement from the family's volunteer mentor, Rose, Ahmad agreed that the additional income would allow their family some stability and continue to make a better life for their children.

With assistance from Rose and support from the local resettlement director, plans to establish a catering business moved forward. The greatest challenge was locating and securing a commercial kitchen, a precursor to securing a required Albany County business permit. Renting a private commercial kitchen in Albany was cost prohibitive, as it was unlikely that Fatima would generate enough income to cover rental fees. Rose, however, contacted and met with the directors of Catholic Charities and the St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry and described her intent to help launch a catering business on behalf of Syrian refugee women. The only ingredient missing to make this business a reality was access to a commissary kitchen. In response, Catholic Charities identified and offered, without charge, a commercial kitchen for use 3 days per week. With a kitchen at their disposal, Rose applied for a business permit, opened a business banking account, arranged for a health department inspection, and applied for insurance. In addition to support from Rose, one volunteer created a business website, another created a business logo and brochure, and another registered the business with the state for tax payment purposes. Rose ordered aprons bearing the business logo.

Once the pieces were in place, Fatima recruited other Syrian women to staff the business. Initially, men would deliver orders for customers requesting delivery, but women slowly assumed that role as they became licensed drivers. During its first full year, the business thrived and employed eight women at different times. The size of any order determined how many women would be called into work. Each woman was assigned foods to prepare and was responsible for purchasing the necessary ingredients. In addition to catering, four women prepared and sold food weekly at two local farmers markets and at a large city festival, which helped to advertise the business to a broader audience. These women had never held jobs, and so this opportunity provided them with their own earnings, which they used to provide necessities for their children and their homes. Two of these four women were widows with children at home, while two were married. Married women often had to overcome the hesitancy of their husbands who cited safety concerns about their working outside of the house.

Today, after 5 years in operation, the business continues to be a small success. It has catered small weddings, university student welcoming events, local school picnics, open houses, office luncheons, potlucks, fundraisers, a housewarming, and family gatherings. The momentum that the business was experiencing ground to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic; it did not take orders or participate in any farmers markets for over a year. One of the current challenges is having enough help for large orders. Of those women who were part of the business since its inception, several have moved away, while others have chosen not to continue to work because of competing priorities (e.g., childcare) or because it was not providing a consistent source of income. Two women currently work with Fatima regularly, and together they can easily manage all orders. Growth of the business is limited because of the limited availability of the kitchen.

While financially the business is not yet generating enough income to sustain anyone economically, its success as an enterprise can be measured in other ways. Contact with English speakers, particularly at farmers markets, gave these women one of their first opportunities to meet the public in a significant way. And the public, both customers and other vendors, welcomed them warmly. At the kitchen, they quickly learned proper health food handling policies; Fatima's role includes instructing all cooks on safe food handling, storage, and cleanup. To achieve economies of scale, Fatima now purchases all food for all orders; this small change has ensured consistency in quality and quantity. Furthermore, it has made payment and recordkeeping a less complicated process.

Fatima's goal in the future is to one day open a restaurant that will provide steady employment for herself and other refugees. Fatima is deeply focused on ensuring her children thrive and succeed. Both Fatima and Ahmad make education a priority. Their eldest child, a daughter, will be attending college in 2023 with her own ambitious career goals.

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the years, we have helped place many refugees and immigrants in food service, cleaning, and hospitality jobs. From our perspective, these success stories tell of newcomers on their way to achieving self-sufficiency. We thought we were successful because we were helping to meet the government's expectation that immigrants and

refugees should be economically self-sufficient and off the United States welfare system as quickly as possible (Ludwig, 2013; Wehrle et al., 2018).

However, when we listened to the voices of the women themselves, we recognized that we needed to challenge our assumptions that the refugee and immigrant women we serve will be fulfilled and happy with their initial jobs in the United States. To best serve these women, we must not fall into the trap of low expectations but help women pursue their own career goals in their own way, on their own terms. It is important to be aware of the pressure that the U.S. government places on refugees and immigrants to quickly become economically self-sufficient, as this pressure to start working in any job that a newcomer is qualified for reduces the likelihood that the newcomer can pursue critical vocational training such as English language classes and education and certification programs.

We share our experiences so that others can learn from our observations. There is tremendous pressure for newcomers to start working in any job they are qualified for as quickly as possible after arriving in the United States. This pressure is met with many immigrants and refugees doing just that. They put their dreams aside and do what they need to do to meet the requirements and standards of their new country. But our focus groups suggest that their dreams of ambitious careers may not go away. Furthermore, our case studies show that newcomers are willing to work hard in order to make their career dreams come true.

We recommend that other immigrant and refugee-serving agencies take the following steps. First, listen to the career ambitions of newcomers. Let them be heard and express what they want for themselves and try to avoid downplaying their preferences and desires if they do not fit with cultural expectations and pressures. Second, give newcomers realistic previews of the challenges they will face pursuing ambitious careers. Refugee and immigrant career ambitions should be heard and taken seriously, yet there is just as much value to being realistic about the work involved, the time commitments required, and the expectations from stakeholders like the government and their families. Third, connect newcomers with community resources. For many newcomers, career advancement seems impossible because of a lack of resources such as English language skills, transportation, childcare and so on. Many communities offer support, but connections are often missing to these supportive

programs. Mentors and volunteers can serve as that missing link to connect refugees and immigrants to resources in the community.

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Jona Hoxha, Serae Lafache-Brazier, Faraidoon Norzai, and Stephan Ezeizat for their help translating, conducting focus groups, and analyzing data. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of the St. Vincent de Paul parishioners and food pantry volunteers.

Funding Declarations

We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the John, Marie, and Joseph Whalen Foundation Inc., which was provided to the first author. The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Whalen Foundation.

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