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Picturing the ambiguity of homestay: a photovoice exploration of Ukrainian refugee women's experiences with their Canadian hosts in Toronto

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women hosted by Canadian families in the Greater Toronto Area, focusing on the dynamics of this unique living arrangement amidst Toronto's challenging housing situation. Using Feminist Standpoint Theory and a research-creation approach through Photovoice, eighteen Ukrainian refugee women shared and reflected on their experiences via photo elicitation interviews. The analysis, combining visual and narrative elements, highlights three key themes: Host-Guest Dynamics in Shared Spaces, which sheds light on the complexities of navigating interpersonal relationships within shared living environments; Adaptation through Coexistence, emphasizing the mutual adjustments and cultural exchanges between hosts and guests; and Refining the Path of Refugee Hosting, which reflects on the evolving practices and lessons learned from these hosting arrangements. These findings underscore the importance of centering refugee women's voices to better understand the social, cultural, and political factors shaping their hosting experiences and contribute to advancing the discourse on refugee hosting practices.

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, has led to a severe crisis, disproportionately affecting Ukrainian women (Al-Hamad, Metersky, Yoon, et al., 2024). Exposed to violence and instability, these factors have driven a significant number of Ukrainian women to migrate, seeking safety away from the immediate dangers of war (Al-Hamad, Metersky, Yoon, et al., 2024; Al-Hamad, Metersky, Parada, et al., 2024). This situation underscores the urgency of understanding the experiences of these vulnerable groups effectively. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, more than 5.5 million refugees have fled the country, 90% of whom are women and children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2022). Many countries have made efforts to temporarily or permanently settle large numbers of Ukrainian refugees (Angenendt et al., 2022; Antezza et al., 2022; Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022; Trojanek & Gluszak, 2022). Canada launched two pathways for Ukrainians to enter Canada: as temporary residents with 3-year visas via the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) or via a family reunification sponsorship pathway (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). More than 210,178 Ukrainian refugees had already arrived in Canada between 17 March 2022 and 28 November 2023 (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2022). The CUAET program is among several initiatives launched by the Government of Canada to assist Ukrainians during the crisis. This program provides Ukrainians and their families with complimentary, extended temporary residency, enabling them to work, study, and reside in Canada until conditions are secure for their return home (Immigration Refugees and

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Citizenship Canada, 2022). The CUAET program had received almost 1.2 million applications and has approved 936,293 such applications by late 2023 (Government of Canada, 2023). Thus, over 700,00 can still arrive to Canada in the near future. Upon arrival to Canada, up to 90,000 emergency visa holders are considering to settle or have chosen to settle in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA – comprised of the City of Toronto and the municipalities of Peel, Durham, Halton, and York), a location where finding affordable housing has been a considerable challenge for the last decade or so (Osman, 2024). Refugees to the GTA experience housing insecurity (Hasan, 2022a) due to the lack of available housing and the resulting high rental and housing costs.

Moving to their first house in Canada is both a significant challenge and a major milestone for refugees (Rose & Charrette, 2020). They often require intensive orientation and financial support due to unfamiliarity with the Canadian housing system and potential discriminatory practices (Rose & Charrette, 2020). Without family guidance, refugees struggle to navigate these complexities and secure housing in safe, supportive neighborhoods where they can form vital social connections. Due to the rapid influx of Ukrainian refugees to Canada, many Canadians have chosen to host refugees in their personal homes, despite having little or no prior experience of or readiness to do so and not receiving any financial remuneration for enacting such a role (Antezza et al., 2022). The refugee hosting experience involves considerable ambiguity in terms of how successful, effective, or safe these experiences can be because they involve many potential uncertainties, pitfalls, opportunities, challenges, and power relations including racialized and gendered hierarchies (Cukier & Vogel, 2022).

A notable shift in migration trends is the increasing prevalence of women as primary migrants, challenging traditional gender norms and transforming family and household dynamics in both their countries of origin and settlement (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024). However, this evolution in gender roles also underscores the layered experiences of displacement, where factors such as race and socioeconomic status further complicate individual experiences and opportunities (Pattani, 2022). Doreen Indra's research on gender and forced migration emphasizes the deeply gendered nature of displacement, challenging the notion that migration is a neutral experience (Indra, 1999). Displacement is profoundly shaped by societal expectations and gender roles, which influence the experiences of individuals across the gender spectrum (Indra, 1999). For example, women and girls, who make up the majority of the displaced population from face unique vulnerabilities, including heightened risks of violence and health challenges (Cintra et al., 2023). These gendered experiences are further compounded by traditional caregiving roles that women often assume, which can restrict their mobility and limit their access to essential resources (Pattani, 2022).

Much research has examined migration and settlement experiences of refugees, including those of refugee women and how they adapt to their host communities (Cukier & Vogel, 2022; Javanbakht, 2022; Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022; Zeng, 2022). However, only a few studies have explored the experiences of refugees with their host families, and these studies have revealed both benefits and risks. Further studies have identified postmigration stressors and hardships faced by Ukrainian refugee women, such as financial hardship (Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022), underemployment (Panchenko, 2022), social and cultural adaptation (Javanbakht, 2022), and being alone with their children and the disconnection from their partners (Dobson, 2022), all of which can affect their settlement and integration, and their experiences with their host families. Additional research is needed to understand the housing experiences of the most recent wave of refugees to Canada who are entering during a period of record high accommodation costs (Osman, 2024). Additional research in this area suggests that supporting their basic needs (food, clothing, longer-term housing) and wellbeing (e.g. access to mental health and healthcare) has been a great challenge (Zeng, 2022), especially in the context of stigma, lack of awareness among refugees and service providers, lack of resources, and lack of available trauma-focused supports (Javanbakht, 2022). Despite this growing body of research on Ukrainian refugee women, additional research is needed to understand the experiences of the most recent wave to Canada who are entering during a period of record high accommodation costs (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 2021; Condon, 2023; Hasan, 2022b; Weichel, 2022), which may leave them dependent on their hosts for accommodation for longer.

Despite increasing attention to the role of gender in forced migration, humanitarian responses and policies frequently fail to adequately address gender-specific needs. Current frameworks often prioritize operational efficiency over empowerment and meaningful participation by displaced individuals, leaving significant gaps in their capacity to respond effectively to diverse gender identities (Ekanayake et al.,

2023; Freedman, 2015). While refugee protection laws are evolving to integrate gender perspectives, these approaches remain insufficiently nuanced and fail to fully capture the complexities of intersecting identities such as race and class (Pattani, 2022). Additionally, international laws and conventions designed to protect asylum seekers and refugees claim to be gender-neutral, however the bias in both the drafting and application of these laws often excludes women, as their forms of persecution are not fully recognized (Freedman, 2007). The male-centric interpretation of refugee law reflects and reinforces existing gender biases, further marginalizing women (Freedman, 2007, 2015).

Although awareness of the importance of gender in forced migration has grown, there remains a critical gap in addressing the specific needs of displaced individuals across diverse identities (Ekanayake et al., 2023). This gap highlights the urgency of integrating comprehensive gender perspectives into migration policies and humanitarian practices to ensure equitable and inclusive support for all individuals affected by displacement (Ekanayake et al., 2023; Freedman, 2007, 2015). As the housing situation continues to be of challenge in the GTA requiring Canadians to host Ukrainian refugees in their homes, it is vital to understand the experiences of refugees with their hosts to increase the viability and success of this option. Understanding Ukrainian refugee women's experiences of hosting in the GTA can clarify how these experiences relate to broader social, cultural, and political structures of inequity and oppression.

Employing Feminist Standpoint Theory, this study leverages the unique perspectives of Ukrainian refugee women to generate deeper insights into their hosting experiences. Feminist perspectives and Feminist Standpoint Theory provide a critical framework for this research by centering the lived experiences of refugee women and analyzing how intersecting oppressions shape their realities (Harding, 2004; Indra, 1999). Feminist Standpoint Theory emphasizes the situated knowledge of marginalized groups, arguing that individuals at the intersections of systemic oppressions such as, gender, class, and race possess unique insights into social structures (Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 2019). This approach is particularly relevant for understanding the challenges faced by refugee women, as it reveals how their experiences are shaped by overlapping systems of power and inequality (Hartsock, 2019). For instance, refugee women often endure gender-based violence not only as a result of displacement but also as a continuation of systemic inequities in both their origin and host countries (Freedman, 2016; Indra, 1999). These experiences are compounded by resource inequities, as women frequently face barriers to accessing essential services and opportunities due to caregiving roles or cultural constraints (Freedman, 2015; Indra, 1999). Systemic marginalization, including gender biases embedded in refugee policies, often overlooks the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women, thereby perpetuating their marginalization within the asylum process (Freedman, 2015).

By applying a feminist lens, this research critically examines these intersecting oppressions and underscores the importance of including refugee women's voices in developing equitable policies and practices. This perspective not only exposes the structural barriers they face but also highlights their agency and resilience, reinforcing the need for gender-sensitive approaches to address the complexities of forced migration (Freedman, 2015; Hartsock, 2019; Indra, 1999).

Additionally, the research-creation approach, which includes Photovoice, is used to empower participants by enabling them to document and reflect critically on their lived experiences through photography and narrative engagement. This combination of theoretical and methodological approaches facilitates a nuanced analysis of the intersectional challenges faced by these women, highlighting the power dynamics at play in their interactions with host families and broader societal structures. The analysis combines visual data from photographs with thematic narrative analysis, enhancing the robustness and credibility of the findings (Tsang, 2020). The study research questions are:

1. How do Ukrainian refugee women conceptualize their experiences with their Canadian hosts in the GTA?
2. How do Ukrainian refugee women in the GTA perceive the opportunities and challenges living with Canadian hosts?

Theoretical approach

This research draws on Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) (Harding, 2020) and aspects of a research-creation approach (Loveless, 2019) to give voice to Ukrainian refugee women and co-create knowledge about

their experiences. Feminist standpoint theory seeks to adopt a stance that simultaneously respects empirical reality and acknowledges how our material conditions shape our perceptions and interpretations of that world (Harding, 2004). Feminist perspectives, particularly Feminist Standpoint Theory, offer a valuable lens for examining the lived experiences of refugee women by highlighting the intersecting systems of oppression that shape their realities (Gurung, 2020; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 2019). Feminist Standpoint Theory prioritizes the knowledge and perspectives of marginalized groups, recognizing that individuals situated at the crossroads of systemic inequities such as, those rooted in gender, race and class possess unique and critical insights into the broader social structures that perpetuate their marginalization (Freedman, 2015, 2016; Hartsock, 2019).

This framework is especially relevant in understanding the multifaceted challenges refugee women face. Gender-based violence often persists throughout displacement, reflecting systemic inequities from both their countries of origin and their host environments (Freedman, 2016). These vulnerabilities are compounded by resource inequities, with refugee women frequently encountering significant barriers to accessing essential services and opportunities due to their caregiving responsibilities or cultural constraints (Hartsock, 2019; Indra, 1999; Pattani, 2022). Furthermore, systemic marginalization embedded within refugee policies often neglects the specific needs of women, reinforcing gender biases and perpetuating their exclusion within the asylum process (Freedman, 2015). By adopting a feminist approach, this research underscores the necessity of amplifying refugee women's voices to develop policies and practices that address their unique vulnerabilities and challenges. This perspective not only highlights the structural barriers they encounter but also emphasizes their agency and resilience, advocating for gender-sensitive strategies to navigate the complexities of forced migration (Freedman, 2015; Indra, 1999).

The research creation approach is a scholarly approach and activity that treat art practices as legitimate research methodologies in themselves (Loveless, 2019). These frameworks allow us to deconstruct normative conceptions of power to help refugee women build resilience and inform the development of socially inclusive hosting regulations and practices. The selected frameworks can help leverage the creation and interpretations of literacy or artistic works for research and knowledge co-creation (Barrett & Bolt, 2014; Chapman & Sawchuk, 2015; Leavy, 2018; Snepvangers & Davis, 2018). The FST encourages participation in the creation of knowledge and the social construction of reality by those who have traditionally been marginalized from conventional power structures or areas of decision-making. Scholars including Halpern (2019) and (Harding, 2004, 2020) have used FST from the perspective of underprivileged groups and produce knowledge that will empower these populations by explicitly focusing on the power dynamics inherent in the research process.

The FST is increasingly being used in combination with artistic approaches in the humanities and social sciences, as researchers learn how pictures and images have the potential to empower marginalized women, including refugee women (Allen, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2020; Collins, 1997; Gurung, 2020; Halpern, 2019; Harding, 2020; Hartsock, 2019; Watson et al., 2018; West, 2018). It is important to note that this theory posits that because refugee women have historically been marginalized and oppressed, they have a unique understanding of how power and privilege function in society, how these forces affect them, and the successful ways to overcome their difficulties.

The research creation approach mobilizes artistic practice as 'a sensibility and approach that is attentive to how form makes worlds' (Loveless, 2019, p. 102). Research-creation is a method of knowledge creation that combines creative works including photos with scholarly investigation (Harake, 2019; St Hilaire, 2018), and can also be leveraged as an effective form of knowledge dissemination (Loveless, 2019; Manning, 2016). This study combines photos, metaphors and collage outputs towards the intention of mobilizing new knowledge and insight around timely and politically salient issues affecting Ukrainian refugees. The use of photo collage and metaphor-making processes echoes Manning and Massumi's (2015) 'act of making' or 'semblance experience' where refugee women's perception of an object/image/metaphor can reflect and maintain the vitality behind the image, bringing their experiences to life. This approach also offers diverse venues for rendering this research accessible beyond academic researchers, for example, to the general public and community-based refugee service providers. It can, therefore, contribute to social discourse around the potential of images to uncover the meaning and consequences of refugee experiences with an emphasis on visual literacy for political and empowering women's engagement.

Materials and methods

Photovoice, which is a community-based participatory action research approach rooted in the principles of critical consciousness theory and feminist theory, was utilized in this study (Freire, 2020; Wang, 2022). It involves documentary photography as a way to enact social change and reform and provides rich insights (Liebenberg, 2018; Wang, 2022). Participants were trained to take photographs and use them as visual representations to identify and address pressing issues in their everyday lives in the community (Liebenberg, 2018; Wang, 2022). The method gives participants a 'voice via camera' (Saksena & McMorrow, 2020), and has proven its value in helping amplify their voices, empowering them, and allowing them to think beyond the personal level in the research process (Biglin, 2021; Lumbus et al., 2022; Miled, 2020; Saksena & McMorrow, 2020; Tipples et al., 2021).

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Photovoice are particularly well-suited for researching refugee women as they prioritize marginalized voices and emphasize the importance of situated knowledge. FST argues that knowledge is socially constructed and rooted in specific social positions, making it crucial to include the perspectives of those historically excluded from power structures, such as refugee women (Cabrera et al., 2020; Gurung, 2020). This framework underscores the value of understanding the unique experiences of refugee women by examining their social location and amplifying their voices in knowledge production (Gurung, 2020). It also aligns with empowering those traditionally disenfranchised, ensuring their active participation in constructing meaningful insights (Cabrera et al., 2020; Gurung, 2020).

Photovoice complements FST by providing participants with a visual platform to express their lived realities, fostering both empowerment and agency (Cubero et al., 2024; Martínez-Guzmán et al., 2018). As a participatory methodology, it allows refugee women to document their experiences visually, promoting their active role in shaping narratives about their lives (Martínez-Guzmán et al., 2018; Miled, 2020). Moreover, Photovoice critically examines the politics of representation, enabling participants to challenge stereotypes and assert their identities in ways that traditional research methods might overlook (Cubero et al., 2024). The use of FST is justified as it highlights the agency and situated knowledge of marginalized groups, such as refugee women, while Photovoice enables their active involvement in documenting their experiences, fostering dialogue, and shaping policy through visual storytelling (Cubero et al., 2024; Gurung, 2020). Both FST and Photovoice offer powerful tools for amplifying refugee women's voices and genuinely serve to empower participants without perpetuating any inequalities (Cubero et al., 2024; Gurung, 2020).

This method minimizes the power differential between researchers and participants by granting autonomy to the participants and encouraging group participation, creativity, and self-reflection (Al-Hamad et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2015; Isidori, 2018; Mayra, 2022). Photovoice empowers women in research by allowing them to control how their stories are represented, transforming them from mere subjects to active knowledge co-creators (Wang, 2022; Wang & Burris, 1997; Watchman et al., 2020). This method involves taking photographs that express their personal experiences, elevating their voices in often marginalized discussions and allowing them to visually communicate complex issues (Wang, 2022). Photovoice also enhances refugee women's sense of agency through direct engagement in the creative process (Saksena & McMorrow, 2020).

The selection of Ukrainian women only in the study underscores the agency of these women in managing hospitality, addressing vulnerabilities through their hosting and guesting practices. By drawing on cultural similarities and or differences and redefining their roles, they actively contribute to family dynamics while challenging imposed identities within the host communities and their hosts (Rottmann & Nimer, 2021). Additionally, their experiences demonstrate their agency and resourcefulness and shed light on the challenges of resettlement, as they take on gendered hosting responsibilities within their communities, often eclipsing the involvement of established host communities (Gardner et al., 2022). Similarly, Degani and De Stefani (2020) concluded that refugee women encounter distinct challenges stemming from the intersection of factors such as race, gender, and class, which add complexity to their experiences in hosting arrangements.

Data collection

After obtaining ethics approval for the institutional Research Ethics Board (REB# 2023-209), Ukrainian refugee women were recruited using the team's extensive networks with newcomer service providers in

the GTA (via flyers, announcements, and social media) as well as via Ukrainian community and religious institutions. Women were eligible to participate in the study if they were: a Ukrainian refugee woman under the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUATE), 18 years or older, and have been in Canada for at least 6 months. Eligible participants should also be able to recall and articulate their hosting experiences in conversational English or Ukrainian at a secondary school level and must have previously lived with a host in Canada, though not currently residing with one. However, they will not qualify for this study if they are not a Ukrainian refugee woman, cannot speak English or Ukrainian, have been in Canada for less than 6 months, or have never lived with a host in Canada or are still living with one.

Eighteen participants who arrived in Canada within the past year and have resided in the GTA with a host family were recruited. Between September 2023 to January 2024, data were collected using introductory interviews with eligible refugee women who were then invited to take photographic representations of their hosting experiences as well as provide a narrative engagement with each photo they took. Participants were given two weeks to reflexively take, share, and interpret photographs of their lives and hosting experiences. Then, the research team used participant's shared photos to talk to each participant individually in a semi-structured video-recorded interview through the online Zoom teleconferencing platform. One-on-one photo elicitation interviews lasted between 45–60 minutes with each participant with fieldnotes taken throughout to document emotional reactions of the participants as they reflected on their photos. A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the **SHOWeD** mnemonic by Wang (2022): What do you **SEE**? What is really **HAPPENING**? How does it relate to **OUR** lives? **WHY** does the situation exist? What can we **DO** about it? All interviews were recorded with consent. Participants were asked to choose three to five of their favorite photos that represent their experiences and answer the research questions. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Data analysis

Data analysis includes both visual (participants' photos) and narrative data (interview data) based on both participants' and researcher's perspectives to ensure that the final analysis was a credible visual and narrative explanation of the phenomenon (Tsang, 2020). Analyzing issues through Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and employing Photovoice significantly enriches debates by emphasizing marginalized perspectives and fostering participatory research. FST advocates that the lived experiences of marginalized groups provide essential insights that challenge mainstream understandings, thus offering a more nuanced view of reality (Harding, 2020; Hartsock, 2019). By incorporating these perspectives, FST highlights how power dynamics shape knowledge production (Harding, 2004, 2020). Photovoice complements this by giving participants control over how their experiences are represented, using photography to capture the complexity of their daily lives and concerns (Wang, 2022). This method not only democratizes the research process but also visually communicates the impact of societal structures on individual experiences, making the abstract more concrete and accessible (Wang, 2022; Watchman et al., 2020). Together, FST and Photovoice empower participants, validate their experiences, and promote social change, adding depth and authenticity to academic and policy debates.

The visual analysis included: (a) a photograph analysis based on the researcher's interpretations; (b) a photograph analysis based on the participants' interpretations; (c) a cross-comparison; and (d) development of final themes (Tsang, 2020). For narrative data, data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis technique. Thematic analysis involves finding, summarizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within interview data. Once the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo 12 software. This software was utilized for data storage, coding, and analysis. The first author, along with two research assistants, thoroughly read the interview transcripts multiple times coding line by line. Through this process, overarching categories emerged and were subsequently organized as parent nodes. Within these, repetitive and significant patterns were further classified as child nodes. The next step involved combining similar categories into broader, more general themes. To enhance the presentation of the findings, exemplary quotes were selected, which illustrated common patterns among Ukrainian refugee women's narratives. Emotional reactions from field

notes were coded as they may be linked to participants' experiences. To maintain coding accuracy and ensure consistency, regular discussions were conducted with the research team. To verify the credibility of the study's results, various measures of trustworthiness were implemented, such as member checking and confirmability (Anney, 2014). A summary of the study's findings was shared with five participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the reported results with their experiences. This step not only validates the research findings but also empowers participants by involving them actively in the interpretation process. It ensures that the narratives and conclusions drawn by the researchers truly reflect the participants' perspectives and are not just the interpretations imposed by the researchers (Anney, 2014). This can be particularly important in research involving vulnerable populations like refugees, where ensuring the authenticity of their voice in the research is critical. Of these, three participants affirmed that the final themes precisely reflected their experiences and offered no further suggestions, while two did not respond. The confirmability of the study was achieved by maintaining detailed notes, reflective journals, and an audit trail during the entire data collection and analysis processes. We also maintain detailed documentation of how data was collected, how categories and themes were derived, and how interpretations were made. As a token of appreciation for their participation and time, participants were given a CAD 25 gift card to a coffee shop (see Table 1 for the demographic profile of the participants).

Results

Host-Guest Dynamics in Shared Spaces

The theme of 'Host-Guest Dynamics in Shared Spaces' is critical for understanding the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women and their Canadian hosts in the GTA. This dynamic in this relationship is complex, deeply human, multifaceted and encompasses aspects of safety and security. Ukrainian refugee women's experiences of hosting are characterized by evolving trust, mutual respect, effective conflict resolution, and shared responsibilities. The process of rebuilding trust is further complicated by power dynamics inherent in the host-guest relationship. As Voutira and Harrell-Bond (1992) argue, these dynamics can often create a sense of dependency on the part of refugees while granting hosts significant control over shared spaces and resources. This uneven distribution of power underscores the importance of mutual understanding and the deliberate fostering of an equitable environment. Refugees and hosts must navigate this complexity together, balancing vulnerability with efforts to establish reciprocal trust. Additionally, trust serves as a mechanism for navigating cultural differences and creating a sense of belonging (Essex et al., 2022). Hosts who are culturally sensitive and open to understanding the experience of refugee are more likely to foster an atmosphere where trust can thrive (Essex et al., 2022).

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants.

Characteristics	Category	Ukrainian refugee women (n = 18)
Age	18–30 yrs	13
	31–40 yrs	2
	41–50 yrs	3
Marital status	Single	8
	Married/Common law	7
	Divorced/Separated	3
Education	Undergraduate	8
	Graduate	10
Employment	Employed	15
	Unemployed	3
Average monthly income	Less than 3K	14
	More than 3K	4
Number of dependents	0–2	16
	3–5	2
Sponsorship type	(CUAET)	10
	Family Sponsorship/Private	8
Length of stay in Canada	Less than one year	0
	More than one year	18
Length of stay with your Canadian host	Less than 6 months	10
	More than 6 months to one year	8

CUAET: Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel.

In turn, refugee women contribute to this dynamic by asserting their agency, actively participating in shared living arrangements, and redefining their roles within the host-guest relationship (Essex et al., 2022).

Forina's (2023) research underscores that housing female refugees with male hosts can introduce significant risks, particularly related to power imbalances and gendered vulnerabilities. As noted by Forina (2023) private accommodations often lack adequate safeguards to prevent gender-based violence, exposing women to potential exploitation and harm. Such situations highlight the necessity of incorporating a gender-sensitive framework to assess and mitigate these risks, ensuring that hosting practices prioritize the safety and dignity of female refugees (Al-Hamad & Yasin, 2024; Forina, 2023). This approach necessitates a critical examination of the intersection of gender dynamics and hospitality to foster safer and more equitable hosting environments (Al-Hamad & Yasin, 2024; Forina, 2023). This dynamic not only provides physical safety and support for the refugees but also fosters emotional bonds and a sense of belonging, which are crucial in their journey towards integration and rebuilding their lives in a new country. Sara and Sophie highlight these complexities and the evolving relationships between hosts and Ukrainian refugees:

It's challenging to let a person live in your house. You don't know this person. You don't know this person's intentions and you don't know exactly how long this person will live with you. So, I can only say a lot of thankful words for them, for hosts in Canada. From all my heart and from all of us. – Sara.

So, all the difficulties and challenges that they have, it was outside the house. When I come back to the house, they always have their support, love and I feel like home – Sophie

Most of the participants shared that trust is a cornerstone of any host-guest relationship, especially in the context of refugees seeking shelter in a foreign land. Trust is often built through everyday interactions and mutual respect. This gratitude fosters an environment of respect, further strengthening the bond between the host and guest. As Sara points out, trust is not automatic; there is an inherent risk in opening one's home to a stranger. However, as evidenced by Sarah's experience, where she mentions having access to her host's house, car keys, and credit cards, there is a significant level of trust that is developed over time. This trust goes both ways – the guests need to trust their hosts to provide a safe and supportive environment, as Sarah realizes when she acknowledges the normalcy and safety of her situation.

Like their house becomes our house because we live in the basement, and they live upstairs all the time we know the password from the house. We know where the keys are from their car, where the credit cards are, they trust us, they trust that I'm there anytime we come to their house, and they told us, 'If you need anything from the refrigerator if you want to eat if you need something just come upstairs. – Sarah

Conflict resolution in such dynamics often revolves around open communication and empathy. Understanding each other's backgrounds, needs, and boundaries is vital. As the experiences of these women show, conflicts are often external to the host-guest relationship. The complexity of conflict resolution within host-guest dynamics necessitates a deeper understanding of its underlying sources and manifestations (Altunkaynak, 2016). Conflicts often arise due to cultural misunderstandings, differing expectations, and inherent power imbalances between refugee women and their host families (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024; Altunkaynak, 2016). Cultural differences can create tensions when shared norms and practices are not mutually understood or respected (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024). For instance, misunderstandings around privacy, household roles, and communication styles can escalate into larger disputes if left unresolved. Addressing these conflicts requires a proactive approach, including open communication and the establishment of shared expectations (Łuczaj, 2024). Mediation mechanisms rooted in mutual respect and empathy are essential for fostering productive resolutions (Łuczaj, 2024). The support and love provided by the hosts help mitigate these challenges, creating a 'home away from home' feeling for the refugees. Lily and Mary shared the challenges of living with a host and needing to follow the host's terms and expectation:

Hosts want to help but with their own terms, they are helping but then expect me also to be the way they want me to be, that is like more terms and conditions apply when hosting, but we always solve any issue by communication and discussion. – Lily

It's hard to be with someone else all the time. It's hard to live by rules of other people, but she was all the time very appreciated to me and respectful and she was thankful when I helped her, and she have more time to rest after work – Mary

The sharing of responsibilities and roles is a practical aspect of these dynamics. Alex's mention of shared meals points to a communal living style, which not only helps in reducing the logistical burden, but also creates a sense of family and belonging. Nina's contribution to household chores and assisting their elderly hosts indicate a reciprocal relationship, where the refugees are not just passive recipients of aid, but active participants in the household.

We had a lot of food together, like almost every day we had dinner altogether and spent sometimes with them in the evening to watch TV or like we did some games altogether. I think it's made us closer to each other. Taking photos allowed me to show what words can't. I felt like I was heard for the first time – Alex

They're elderly and sometimes they need help with any kind of things that we could do and we were always willing to, we helped them in the house – Nina

This reciprocity extends beyond mere household tasks. As Sarah and Mary express, emotional support and sharing of emotions are critical. Hosts not only provide physical shelter but also become emotional anchors, as Olga's experience signifies.

So, I'm completely grateful to my host. Having someone who will be on your side and walking with you on this long journey is really important because you feel supported not only in like I didn't need to worry where I will be sleeping or what I'll be eating but also emotionally – Olga

The majority of women ($n=17$) in this study conclude that they are not just guests but family, not just receivers of kindness but active participants in a community built on mutual care and understanding (see [Figure 1](#) for photos depicting theme 1).

The below images vividly encapsulate the theme of 'Host-Guest Dynamics in Shared Spaces', illustrating how shared physical environments foster interaction and mutual cultural exchange between hosts and guests. The attached images visually affirm the textual analysis by highlighting how shared spaces and common activities foster trust, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging in host-guest relationships. The sweatshirt bearing 'Home is Toronto' symbolizes the emotional journey of guests in redefining their sense of home within a new cultural and geographical context. It reflects their gradual adaptation and identification with the host environment, signaling a positive integration experience. The barbecue image represents shared activities that create opportunities for cultural exchange and relationship-building. Such informal gatherings are critical in bridging cultural divides, fostering a sense of community, and establishing reciprocal bonds between hosts and guests. The backyard scene with a coffee cup epitomizes the significance of shared and private spaces in creating a balanced living arrangement. It conveys a sense of comfort and at ease, illustrating how well-maintained shared environments can contribute to guests feeling at ease and connected. Together, these images demonstrate how collaborative use of shared spaces and inclusive activities strengthen interpersonal dynamics, enabling refugee women to feel at home and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and belonging. Together, these images provide a visual affirmation of the textual analysis, demonstrating how shared spaces and common activities are crucial for building strong, positive dynamics between hosts and guests, ultimately contributing to the guests' sense of home and belonging.



Figure 1. Photos depicting the theme of host-guest dynamics in shared spaces.

Adaptation through coexistence

Adaptation through coexistence theme highlights the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in the GTA and their journey of cultural exchange and understanding with their Canadian hosts. This process involves not only learning about Canadian customs and norms but also sharing elements of Ukrainian culture, leading to a rich intercultural exchange. In addition, the process of adaptation through coexistence is a vivid illustration of mutual cultural exchange and understanding. This process involves more than just learning about each other's customs; it's about sharing experiences, celebrating differences, and adjusting to new ways of living. Cultural adaptation, while crucial to building rapport and easing tensions, extends beyond symbolic acts such as food sharing. Although sharing meals often serves as a powerful tool for cultural exchange and fostering trust, it is just one dimension of adaptation (Arcadu et al., 2024). Other practices, such as learning and using each other's languages, co-creating household routines, and participating in cultural or religious traditions, also play critical roles in bridging cultural divides (Taylor et al., 2023). For example, refugee women who engage in language acquisition and hosts who make efforts to celebrate cultural traditions together demonstrate a mutual willingness to adapt and build connections. These broader aspects of cultural adaptation highlight the multi-faceted ways in which shared cultural traits can be expressed within hosting arrangements (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023). The experiences shared by many participants illustrate a deep and meaningful cultural exchange. Sarah's and Nina's recounting of their hosts taking them to Ukrainian restaurants, trying traditional foods like borsch and pierogies, and even attempting to learn the Ukrainian language exemplifies a genuine interest and respect for Ukrainian culture:

They take us to Ukrainian restaurants and ask, "Can you recommend us Ukrainian food?" and we eat borsch together, pierogies, different kinds of food. So, it was really amazing, and they tried to learn our culture – Sarah

We took them to Ukrainian restaurants and, shared like the Ukrainian traditions and food. Seeing and talking about my photos made me realize that my experiences are important to others. – Nina

This enthusiasm for cultural exchange is reciprocal; as Olga mentions, the Ukrainian refugees are also introduced to the Canadian hosts' culture, traditions and cuisines.

Actually, hosts help me a lot because they had like friends and whenever they go, they would invite me so I would understand like what people are talking like in general about what's Canadian culture, they helped me to understand how everything works in Canada – Olga

Similarly, the integration of Ukrainian cultural elements into the Canadian household is evident in Sarah's mention of the children learning Ukrainian phrases. This not only helps the refugees feel more at home but also enriches the cultural understanding of the host family.

The kids already know some Ukrainian phrases and they can repeat, they are trying to learn our language and it was really nice of them. But I can see the huge difference between Ukrainian way of growing up the kids and their behaviour – Sarah

As the children absorb these phrases, they not only bring joy to Sarah, making her feel a sense of belonging and home, but they also immerse themselves in a world different from their own. This learning experience is more than linguistic; it is a journey into empathy, understanding, and respect. The walls of the house, once just a physical structure, now echo the merging of Ukrainian and Canadian voices, symbolizing a deeper connection and a shared humanity. In this space, cultural boundaries blur, doors and hearts open, and the essence of two worlds comes together, enriching the fabric of both the refugees' and the host families' lives.

Adjusting to new norms and lifestyles is a significant aspect of the adaptation process. Sophie's description of the youthful and humorous nature of her host household points to the adaptation to different social dynamics and lifestyles in Canada. The laughter and compatibility she found in these new settings eases the transition and fosters a sense of belonging.

A good house, like only young people live here. It's special too because they had little things that made me laugh and made me realize they were funny, and I would get along with them. Step by step, I come back to normal life, and I think it's a good step for me. – Sophie

Olga's and Olive's experiences further emphasize the importance of social integration. Their hosts' efforts to include them in social gatherings and explain Canadian culture and social norms play a crucial role in their adaptation process. Olive's adoption of the habit of having breakfast with her host, a change from her usual routine, not only signifies adapting to new customs but also improving her relationship with her own children, demonstrating the positive impact of such cultural exchanges on personal lives.

I developed the habit of eating breakfast because my host eats breakfast and we prepare and have breakfast together. Now I changed my habits, and it made a better relationship between me and my kids now because we are eating together in the morning – Olive

Similarly, Sarah's experience with celebrating Thanksgiving highlights the exposure to and participation in Canadian traditions. This integration into Canadian festivities is an important step in understanding and embracing the new cultural environment.

This was Thanksgiving Day last year. I was surprised and I realized that Canada and America have a different date for celebrating Thanksgiving. But it was my first experience in my life before in Ukraine – Sarah. (See [Figure 2](#) for photos depicting theme 2)

On the other hand, the experiences shared by Anna and Natalia highlight significant challenges within the dynamics of hosting relationships that warrant deeper discussion. These quotes encapsulate the nuanced balance between gratitude and autonomy that many refugees navigate in their interactions with host families.

I felt uneasy when my host was overly intrusive, asking personal questions that made me uncomfortable. It's hard because I am grateful for their help, but I also need my privacy. – Anna.

There were times when I was asked to babysit late hours with no prior notice. It felt like I couldn't say no without risking my living situation. – Natalia

The concept of exploitation within host-guest relationships is multi-dimensional and can manifest as unequal labor expectations, where refugee women are expected to undertake disproportionate domestic or caregiving responsibilities in exchange for accommodation (Lehto et al., 2020). Additionally, emotional exploitation may occur when refugee women feel pressured to show gratitude or conform to the hosts' expectations, despite the challenges they face (Altunkaynak, 2016). Such dynamics can undermine the agency of refugee women and perpetuate existing power imbalances. Understanding exploitation within this framework allows for a more critical examination of the vulnerabilities refugee women face and highlights the need for equitable and reciprocal hosting arrangements (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024; Altunkaynak, 2016). Anna's and Natalia's experiences highlight key issues in host-refugee relationships: the need for privacy and the risk of exploitation. For instance, Anna's discomfort with her host's intrusive questions highlights the importance of training hosts to respect privacy and maintain respectful boundaries. Natalia's account of coerced babysitting illustrates power imbalances in these relationships, where refugees might feel compelled to comply with hosts' demands out of fear or gratitude.

The power dynamics inherent in humanitarian aid, revealing the unintended consequences of such assistance and the complexities of host-refugee relationships emphasizes that hosting arrangements are



Figure 2. Photos depicting the theme of adaptation through coexistence.

not neutral but are shaped by inherent power asymmetries (Harrell-Bond, 1986, 2022). Hosts often assume a position of authority, influencing refugees' autonomy and agency, particularly in situations where aid dependency is a factor. Refugees are frequently perceived as passive recipients of charity, rather than active participants in their resettlement, which perpetuates paternalistic attitudes (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The dynamics between hosts and refugees reflect broader systemic inequities, as the host's control over resources and living conditions together with the lack of accountability in humanitarian practices can reinforce refugees' vulnerabilities, highlighting how these imbalances lead to dependency rather than empowerment (Harrell-Bond, 1986). For instance, refugees in private accommodations may face restrictions on mobility, limited access to livelihood opportunities, and minimal input in decision-making processes (Harrell-Bond, 1986). This often results in psychological and social disempowerment, further compounding their marginalization (Harrell-Bond, 1986). Additionally, female refugees, often carrying the dual burden of caregiving and navigating displacement, face unique risks, such as exploitation or lack of privacy (Harrell-Bond, 1986). Harrell-Bond's (1986) work underscores the necessity of creating equitable hosting practices that prioritize the agency of refugees, particularly women, and incorporate their voices in shaping policies and support systems (Harrell-Bond, 2022). Refugee women's empowerment can be leveraged by integrating their skills and perspectives into the aid framework, humanitarian efforts can shift from dependency models to sustainable systems of mutual collaboration (Harrell-Bond, 1986). Moreover, there is a pressing need for restructuring host-refugee dynamics, fostering partnerships that are equitable and inclusive while emphasizing the need for systemic accountability in humanitarian aid (Harrell-Bond, 1986, 2022).

The below images vividly illustrate the theme of 'Adaptation through Coexistence' by showcasing various aspects of Ukrainian cultural integration and social gatherings in a Canadian setting. The image of a shared dinner table, featuring a communal meal with diverse table settings, emphasizes the blending of traditions and the creation of bonds through shared dining experiences. This practice, deeply rooted in hospitality, fosters mutual understanding and strengthens connections between hosts and guests. The Ukrainian cake, adorned with national colors and an inscription, symbolizes the preservation and celebration of cultural identity within a new environment. It highlights how hosting arrangements can provide spaces for refugee women to retain and express their heritage while navigating their integration into Canadian society, fostering both pride and belonging. The image of luggage in a living room captures the transitional nature of hosting arrangements, reflecting both the temporary displacement experienced by refugees and the gradual establishment of stability within shared living spaces. It serves as a visual representation of the physical and emotional adjustments required for successful coexistence. The Christmas tree surrounded by gifts portrays the blending of cultural celebrations, where Canadian festivities are enriched by the incorporation of Ukrainian traditions. This image demonstrates the mutual respect and inclusion of diverse practices, creating a shared sense of community and belonging. Together, these images convey how adaptation through coexistence fosters cultural preservation, mutual understanding, and shared traditions, ultimately enriching the experiences of both hosts and Ukrainian refugees in a Canadian context.

Refining the path of refugees hosting

Refining the path of refugees hosting in the context of Ukrainian refugee women's experiences with their Canadian hosts in the GTA touches upon several critical aspects, including host training and preparedness, family hosting policy, regulations, and practice improvements. The insights provided by the participants reveal a spectrum of experiences and expectations, highlighting areas for refinement and improvement in the hosting process. Sarah, who was pleasantly surprised by the preparation and support provided by her host, underscores the significance of host readiness. The gesture of waiting at the airport and ensuring a fully furnished apartment set a positive tone for her integration. This level of preparedness, however, is not always the norm, as indicated by other participants. For instance, Lily's remarks about hosts wanting to help on their own terms suggest a need for clearer expectations and boundaries in the host-refugee relationship.

I didn't expect that she will wait me in the airport and that our apartment can be so good they prepare everything, and they even ask their friends to bring furniture, to bring the mattresses – Sarah

Host want to help but with their own terms, they are helping but then expect me also to be the way they want me to be, that is like more terms and conditions apply when hosting. – Lily

Moreover, as Mary's experience suggests, prior experience or knowledge in hosting can significantly enhance the preparedness of the hosts.

...and before, the hosts also explained to us, they helped one senior couple, three or four years ago and they also stayed with them for a few months, So, I feel like they were prepared. – Mary

Cindy's and Sophie's comments highlight a lack of clarity and centralization in the hosting process. The absence of a structured system can lead to confusion and challenges in securing host families, as experienced by Cindy. Sophie's suggestion for government-supported temporary housing including a hotline underscores the need for a systemic approach to provide initial stability to refugees.

I don't even know how this system exactly works. I don't think this is something centralized like with the government if someone wants to be a host. It was very difficult. It was maybe even impossible to get a host family in Toronto – Cindy

I hope that maybe the government can help. This first step, when people come, maybe for 2 or 3 weeks some government apartments for many people who can't pay, but people cannot find the apartments very fast by themselves. So maybe this would give them the time to make it possible. Maybe some people who can help newcomers to navigate things because on the websites it's a lot of information. Maybe a hotline you can call or someone you can talk to. – Sophie

The idea of a formal contract, as proposed by Sarah, can introduce transparency and clarity into the hosting arrangement. This contract could outline the responsibilities and expectations of both parties, helping to prevent misunderstandings and ensure that both hosts and refugees are aware of their rights and obligations.

Here people (hosts) do it for free. So probably I think that it's going to be a nice idea to create the contract or something like that – Sarah

From Lily's perspective, refugee women and children face acute vulnerabilities that necessitate a more structured approach to hosting. She advocates for the involvement of organizations or government entities in the hosting process, recognizing the heightened risks these groups face – from emotional trauma to the desperation for shelter, and the unfamiliarity with new systems and cultures. This aligns with Olga's experience of feeling lost in the new environment, indicating the need for a more comprehensive support system that extends beyond basic accommodation.

It would be nice if there were a host program that is connected with an organization. I think it's always good to have a facilitator. It's good because people are scared, especially because [hosts] all want to host women or women with children, and they are the most vulnerable members of the society in the moment of war. So, it's easy that someone will take advantage of them especially if the women are desperate and just want to find a host. When hosting is done with an organization or government then it's three parties involved so it's more stabilized and safer – Lily

Coming to Canada, the government gives you a work permit and they are like go and live your life and I didn't feel like I had a place where I could go and ask questions if not my hosts. – Olga

The experiences of Ukrainian refugee women in the GTA highlight the necessity for more structured, well-prepared, and regulated hosting programs. Enhancing host training, establishing clear policies and contracts, and involving government or organizational oversight could significantly improve the refugee hosting experience. These measures would not only facilitate smoother integration for refugees but also ensure a supportive, respectful, safe, and mutually beneficial relationship between hosts and refugees (see [Figure 3](#) for photos depicting theme 3).

The photos below illustrate the theme of 'Refining the Path of Refugees Hosting' by highlighting aspects that enhance the hosting environment for refugees. The image of the cat in the living room signifies the creation of a shared, comforting home environment. It represents how hosting arrangements can cultivate a sense of normalcy and belonging, with the shared household becoming a mutual space for both hosts and guests. The backyard image with open green space portrays the importance of

providing physical and emotional room for adjustment and growth. Such spaces enable refugees to feel secure and grounded, offering opportunities for personal reflection and recreation, which are vital to their integration journey. The hand holding a cookie in Ukrainian colors highlights cultural preservation and the hosts' acknowledgment of the refugees' identities. This shared appreciation of cultural symbols fosters mutual respect and strengthens the host-guest bond, an essential element in refining hosting practices. Finally, the scenic neighborhood path symbolizes the broader journey of integration, showcasing the role of community settings in making refugees feel part of a welcoming society. It suggests the importance of community support and the potential for refugees to navigate their paths toward stability and inclusion. Together, these images emphasize the importance of shared spaces, cultural recognition, and community environments in improving and refining refugee hosting practices.

Discussion

Our study participants, who are mostly young and educated, residing in the GTA for over a year, offer a unique perspective on their hosting and integration experiences. Their demographics, including employment status and family responsibilities, shape their views on the challenges and opportunities of living with Canadian hosts. With most earning below \$3,000 Canadian dollars per month and having one to two dependents, financial constraints appear to be a significant factor in their hosting and settlement experiences. The longer stay of all participants (more than one year) in Canada implies a degree of acclimatization to the Canadian culture and environment. Their experiences with Canadian hosts, ranging from less than six months to over a year, provides varied insights into the adaptation process in the GTA. Younger, educated and under \$3,000 Canadian dollars per month women might view these opportunities differently from those with different or opposing sociodemographic. Their suggestions for enhancing the hosting model would likely reflect their unique needs and experiences, emphasizing aspects like cultural integration, economic opportunities, support systems, and long-term stability in Canada. These insights could be invaluable in improving settlement and integration outcomes for future refugees. Provision of supports related to housing, resettlement, integration, and access to services is not just a one-way street with no benefit to Canada; many Ukrainian refugees are skilled workers with significant human and social capital, and can promote economic growth and benefit Canadian society overall (Bogdanova, 2021). The study reveals three prominent themes in how Ukrainian refugee women conceptualize their hosting experiences with Canadian hosts in the GTA: host-guest dynamics in shared spaces; adaptation through coexistence; and refining the path of refugees hosting.

The concept of trust is central to understanding the host-guest dynamic in refugee hosting arrangements, especially when examining the relationship between refugee women and their hosting families. Trust in this context is multifaceted and deeply relational, involving both the hosts' and refugees' willingness to be vulnerable and rely on each other, despite inherent uncertainties and power imbalances. As Essex et al. (2022) highlight, trust is indispensable for building meaningful connections and navigating the challenges of resettlement, yet it is often fragile and influenced by prior experiences of betrayal and systemic failures during displacement. The refugee experience itself profoundly shapes trust. Refugees, particularly women, often enter hosting arrangements carrying the burden of past trauma, which can erode their capacity to trust institutions or individuals (Voutira & Harrell-Bond, 1992). This distrust is not



Figure 3. Photos depicting the theme of refining the path of refugees hosting.

merely a lack of trust but a survival mechanism, honed by navigating precarious and often exploitative environments. In hosting arrangements, however, trust must be cautiously rebuilt, as it becomes the foundation for fostering interpersonal relationships and cultural exchange between the refugee and the host family.

Research explicitly focusing on refugee-host relationships is extremely rare although what exists points to complex benefits and challenges of this arrangement. For example, Ran and Join-Lambert's (2020) study of 'family hosting' in France found that it could benefit integration via social connections and feeling a sense of belonging, but that it also negatively affected refugees' privacy and experience of independence. This finding aligns closely with, and is consistent with our study findings, in which a significant number of women recounted experiences where their privacy and confidentiality were compromised by their hosts, whether through deliberate actions or unintentional oversights.

Understanding and addressing conflicts within host-guest relationships requires a nuanced exploration of their underlying causes and expressions (Altunkaynak, 2016). Tensions often emerge from cultural differences, misaligned expectations, and power asymmetries that characterize interactions between refugee women and their host families (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024; Altunkaynak, 2016). These challenges can escalate when cultural norms and practices are not mutually understood or respected, leading to disagreements over privacy, household responsibilities, and communication styles (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024). Effective conflict resolution demands a proactive strategy that emphasizes open dialogue and the development of shared expectations (Łuczaj, 2024). Implementing mediation processes based on empathy and mutual respect is critical for resolving disputes constructively and maintaining harmonious host-guest dynamics (Łuczaj, 2024). Our study's findings resonate with the insights presented in Boccagni and Giudici's (2022) case study conducted in Northern Italy, which posited that hosting refugees in home environments can create powerful counter-narratives to prevalent anti-immigrant sentiments. This concept is further echoed in Kyriakides et al.'s (2019) research on Syrian refugees in Ontario, which highlighted how the refugee-host relationship, fostered within a host family setting, can positively influence refugees' resettlement experiences. It also helps to mitigate the limitations imposed by their new identity as refugees. Correspondingly, many Ukrainian refugee women in this study underscored the benefits of being hosted, particularly in facilitating their settlement and integration, especially amidst the escalating housing rental inflation. These women perceived their hosts as a critical support system, helping them to navigate and potentially avoid the challenges of homelessness in the GTA. This illustrates the pivotal role of host relationships in not only providing physical shelter, but also in fostering a sense of belonging and security in a new country.

In addition, Brinker (2021) examined a novel model of 'homestay' programs for refugees in Spain that appointed an external intermediary to facilitate the refugee-host relationship in an attempt to reduce the power imbalances inherent in the relationship. In this study of Ukrainian refugee women, some participants revealed that their experiences with Canadian hosts are opportunities for cross-cultural learning, friendship, respect, and meaningful integration – but others have commented that being hosted can trigger a sense of ambiguity regarding their expected role and responsibilities. Exploitation in host-guest relationships is a complex issue that can take various forms, often reflecting unequal dynamics. Refugee women may face disproportionate expectations to take on domestic or caregiving tasks as part of their accommodation arrangement, creating an imbalance in responsibilities (Lehto et al., 2020). Emotional exploitation can also arise when refugee women feel obligated to express gratitude or conform to their hosts' expectations, even when it adds to their burden (Altunkaynak, 2016). These dynamics can undermine their autonomy and reinforce power inequities, calling attention to the need for fair and reciprocal hosting practices (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024).

The experiences of some women vividly illustrate these challenges and discomfort with their host's intrusive questions highlights the critical need for training hosts to respect boundaries and uphold privacy. Women's experience of being pressured into babysitting demonstrates how power imbalances can compel refugees to comply with demands out of a sense of obligation or fear. These examples underscore the vulnerabilities refugee women face and the importance of fostering equitable and respectful host-guest relationships. A significant number of Ukrainian refugee women highlighted several key areas needing attention and improvement in the refugee hosting process. For instance, they pointed out the

necessity for refining the path of refugee hosting, suggesting that a more structured and well-defined approach would greatly enhance their resettlement experience (Alrawadieh et al., 2024). In addition, hosting programs must establish clear guidelines and feedback mechanisms to protect refugees from exploitation and ensure their autonomy. Furthermore, effective host training and clear policies are essential for fostering respectful and beneficial hosting relationships (Alrawadieh et al., 2024).

The theme of adaptation through coexistence captures the cultural exchange and mutual understanding between Ukrainian refugee women in the GTA and their Canadian hosts. This process goes beyond learning about each other's customs, encompassing shared experiences, celebrating cultural differences, and adjusting to new living arrangements. While food sharing often serves as a gateway for building trust and cultural exchange, adaptation extends to practices such as learning each other's languages, participating in shared traditions, and co-creating household routines (Arcadu et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2023). These actions reflect a mutual willingness to bridge cultural divides and foster meaningful connections. The participants' experiences highlight the multi-dimensional nature of cultural adaptation, demonstrating how shared practices strengthen bonds and enrich host-guest relationships (Al-Hamad, Yasin, et al., 2024). Many Ukrainian refugee women expressed a need for hosts to be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to support refugees effectively, ensuring a more seamless and supportive integration into the host country. A formalized training program for hosts could be instrumental in standardizing the quality of hosting. This training could cover cultural sensitivity, basic language communication skills, and an understanding of the trauma that refugees might have experienced. Refugee women also highlight how the agency of women can offer fresh perspectives on a frequently overlooked aspect of refugee women's lived realities in resettlement. This finding is aligned with a previous study that highlights refugee women's agency and their role in shedding light on their strengths and resourcefulness, as well as the gendered nature of their hosting rituals (Gardner et al., 2022).

These findings collectively underscore the critical role that women play in the resettlement process, not just as recipients of aid and support, but also as active, resourceful agents who contribute significantly to the hosting and integration process. This dual perspective emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and supporting their agency, strengths, and unique needs in the development of refugee hosting policies and practices. Finally, the participants called for improvements in family hosting policies, regulations, and practices. They also advocated for policies that are more attuned to the needs and challenges of refugees, ensuring that the hosting environment is not only welcoming but also safe and conducive to their long-term well-being and integration. These insights underscore the necessity for a holistic and empathetic approach to refugee hosting, one that considers the complex and diverse needs of refugees.

Implications

The study's findings on the experiences of Ukrainian refugee women and their Canadian hosts in the GTA offer valuable insights that can inform policy, research and practice in several ways. This section aims to connect these findings to specific implications that can enhance the effectiveness and equity of refugee hosting practices. One key implication is the need to improve hosting preparedness through structured training programs for host families. The study revealed that many challenges in the host-guest dynamic, including misunderstandings and unmet expectations, could be mitigated with better preparation. Training programs should emphasize cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution skills, and strategies for creating equitable and supportive living environments.

The issue of exploitation within hosting arrangements also requires attention. The study highlighted how unequal labor expectations and emotional burdens can strain the host-guest relationship. Policies must address these vulnerabilities by setting clear boundaries and agreements that define mutual responsibilities and ensure that refugees' contributions are voluntary and valued, rather than coercive or obligatory. Fostering cultural adaptation through community-based initiatives is another critical area for improvement. The study demonstrated that shared activities and mutual engagement between hosts and guests significantly contribute to building trust and fostering a sense of belonging. Local organizations and community programs can play a pivotal role in facilitating cultural exchanges, such as shared celebrations, language learning opportunities, and workshops that bring hosts and refugees together.

Gender-sensitive hosting practices should prioritize the safety and well-being of female refugees (Al-Hamad & Yasin, 2024; Forina, 2023) through targeted strategies. For instance, improved vetting processes for hosts are essential to ensure a safe and supportive environment, particularly for women at higher risk of exploitation or harm (Forina, 2023). Establishing robust support systems for both hosts and guests can foster mutual understanding and address potential conflicts early. These systems should include training programs for hosts on gender sensitivity, cultural competence, and conflict resolution, alongside accessible resources for refugees to report concerns or seek assistance. By embedding these measures into hosting frameworks, hosting arrangements can become safer, more equitable, and empowering for female refugees.

Lastly, the findings underscore the importance of structured state support to sustain hosting arrangements. Participants highlighted the limitations of relying solely on informal hosting practices without systemic backing. Government policies should prioritize the establishment of centralized systems that provide financial assistance, oversight, and mediation services. These systems would ensure equitable access to resources and support for both hosts and refugees, promoting long-term stability and integration. By addressing these areas, the study's implications offer a pathway to enhance the hosting experience for refugee women and their host families, fostering mutual respect, cultural exchange, and sustainable support systems. These targeted recommendations provide actionable steps that align with the lived experiences captured in this research, ensuring that hosting practices evolve to meet the needs of all parties involved.

Strengths and limitations

The project mobilizes photovoice method informed by an innovative application of theory that helped Ukrainian refugee women share their experiences through images as empowering research literacies; this approach helps them to make sense of, and interpret, their experiences in ways that challenge traditional modes of inquiry or knowledge development (Cabrera et al., 2020; Halpern, 2019). The study findings can stimulate further conversations and dialogue on the topic of refugees hosting in order to inspire practice, policy and education changes. It was also apparent that some refugee women faced challenges in conceptualizing their experiences through photographs and providing visual representations of their hosting experiences with Canadian hosts. This challenge perhaps is about the complexity and intangibility of their experiences, which could not be easily captured or conveyed through imagery. It underscored the nuanced nature of their interactions and adjustments in a new cultural environment, where certain emotions and experiences defy straightforward visual depiction.

Conclusion

This study has provided valuable insights into the Ukrainian refugee women's experiences with their Canadian hosts, using photovoice method to enable women to conceptualize and express their experiences through photographs, the study has uncovered nuanced perspectives on the opportunities and challenges they face in their settlement and integration process. The visual narratives created by the participants have not only illuminated their personal journeys but have also offered tangible suggestions for enhancing the hosting model in Canada. This approach has emphasized the importance of amplifying voices of the individuals who are affected by migration policies, ensuring their experiences and recommendations are at the forefront of future improvements. The study results can be used to design/create a more empathetic and effective hosting framework for Ukrainian refugee women's integration into the Canadian society, one that is deeply informed by their lived experiences. Future research is needed to explore refugee hosting and compare different hosting models in different host countries.

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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