Theorizing Karen Women's Experiences of 'Power' to Engage in Self-Help in Resettlement

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Dedication

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Abstract

This study describes the experiences of 10 first-generation Karen women to resettle to St. Paul, Minnesota. Since 2005, Karen people from Burma have been one of the largest refugee groups being resettled to Western resettlement countries. Existing literature suggests that refugee-background communities may have a wealth of knowledge and experiences in developing and adapting self-help structures and processes, and that they play a critical role in their own resettlement. However, little attention has been paid to how, why, and for what purpose new communities are able to (re-)form historical self-help structures in resettlement or the supports or barriers that impact a community's ability to utilize these structures to promote self-help.

The purpose of this study was to examine Karen women's experiences of power to engage in self-help in resettlement. Semistructured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 Karen women who had experience with Karen women's organizations in Burma, Thailand and/or the United States. Interviews were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory methodology. Guided by principles of qualitative research, grounded theory, and ethnographic methods, what emerged was a preliminary theory of "power," defined by participants as agency and capacity to help each other in resettlement, and factors that impacted their power to engage in self-help.

Four categories emerged that explained women's experiences of power to help each other in resettlement: (re-)establishing a self-help structure; personal and premigration relationships or *Knowing Each Other*; having resources, which included knowledge, time, transportation, and financial resources; and having authority. Findings

add knowledge that is situated in cultural context in relation to the experiences of Karen women.

This dissertation study addresses several critical gaps in existing literature by revealing the processes through which a first-generation Karen community (re-)established historical structures of self-help to meet the needs of their community in resettlement, the conditions that affected their agency and capacity to help one another, and by capturing the perspectives and experiences of Karen women. Findings can be used to inform development of interventions and resettlement policies that recognize and support the strengths, strategies, and resources that new refugee-background communities bring with them to resettlement settings.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Karen people from Burma have been involved in the longest civil war in recorded history (South, 2012). In the context of prolonged, generational political oppression, Karen people have suffered severe persecution and frequent displacement and forced migration. Karen women, in particular, have experienced multiple systems of oppression based on their gender, ethnicity, and statelessness (O'Kane, 2006). At the same time, Karen people have been able to achieve some degree of self-determination in settings of extreme marginalization by establishing customary governance systems and other structures to promote self-help in Burma and refugee camps in Thailand (Henry, 2013). Karen women have also formed their own groups to facilitate self-help in these settings.

Since 2005, Karen people from Burma have been one of the largest refugee groups in the world being resettled to Western resettlement countries. Karen people represent a 'pioneer' community in most resettlement countries because there were no existing Karen communities for the first wave of people arriving with refugee status to join (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Between 2007 and 2015, refugees from Burma, primarily Karen, were the largest or second largest group to resettle to Minnesota, comprising a third to half of all arrivals most years (Minnesota Department of Health Refugee Health Department, 2016). In 2010, Power et al. (2010) estimated that 90% of the Karen population in Minnesota lived in the City of St. Paul.

Studies conducted with Karen people in resettlement have documented numerous health, mental health, and resettlement challenges experienced by this group, including

significant language and transportation barriers to accessing health and social services long after their initial resettlement period (Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, & Teboh, 2011; Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012). A recent systematic review of research on the physical and mental health of Karen refugees from Burma concluded that Karen people experienced significant negative health and mental consequences as a result of conflict and persecution, and that multiple losses impacted Karen people's ability to cope and adjust to a new life in resettlement (Hoffman & Robertson, 2016, see also Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011).

Studies have pointed to the important role that Karen community networks play in assisting with healing from loss and trauma and providing opportunities for collective sharing of knowledge and mutual assistance (Harkins, 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Mitschke et al., 2011; Oo & Kusakabe, 2010; Rosbrook & Schweitzer, 2012; Worland & Darlington, 2010). This is consistent with a plethora of existing research on other refugee and immigrant-background groups that document the formation of associations as an "adaptive strategy" by these groups in order to meet their resettlement needs (Borman, 1984, p. 49; Owusu, 2000). However, whether, how, why, and for what purpose new communities are able to (re-)form associations in a resettlement context are impacted by numerous factors. Almost no research has explored how Karen people and women, in particular, have (re-)established historically developed self-help systems to meet community needs in resettlement, or the supports or barriers that have impacted their formation.

This dissertation study addresses several critical gaps in existing literature by revealing the processes through which a first-generation Karen community (re-)established historical structures of self-help to meet the needs of their community in resettlement and the conditions that affected their agency and capacity to help one another. Second, it captured the perspectives and experiences of Karen women, specifically. Findings can be used to inform future research and development of interventions that build upon and utilize the historically developed strengths, strategies, and resources that new refugee-background communities bring with them to resettlement settings.

How I Became Interested in This Topic

In constructivist grounded theory, the researcher's experiences and perspectives shape their engagement with and interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2014). A researcher's professional experience can provide the motivation for study (Holton, 2007). The topic for this dissertation came from my practice experience of working in various roles in the field of refugee resettlement for over 13 years. I initially worked for a refugee resettlement agency, and in this role my view of what constituted 'resettlement' was shaped by official U.S. definitions of resettlement and constructions of refugees as primarily passive recipients of professional resettlement services (Malkki, 1996).

However, as I began working more closely with Karen leaders, I became aware of the primary role that this community played in their own resettlement, and my understanding of the resettlement process itself widened. Volunteering with the Karen Community of Minnesota (KCM), a refugee voluntary association, and assisting with the

formation of the Karen Organization of Minnesota (KOM), one of the first Karen-led social service nonprofits in the United States, helped me to understand the well-organized self-help systems utilized by this community in Minnesota.

A trip to Thailand in 2014 also gave me an appreciation of the historical context and experiences that Karen leaders in Minnesota drew on to (re-)establish self-help structures in resettlement. During this trip, I met with leaders of numerous Karen community-based organizations working in fields of educational, health, environmental, media, religious, and human rights. I also met with leaders of Karen Refugee Committees, teachers, principals, artists, and students who lived in three refugee camps on the Thailand–Burma border. Being exposed to the perspectives of Karen people on their own history, culture, goals, and experiences shaped my understanding of resettlement and adaptation as complex and long-term processes that are influenced by historical experiences. It also challenged dominant constructions of 'refugees' as helpless, traumatized, and dependent, and the inherent limitations of official top-down, individualistic, and neoliberal definitions of 'successful' resettlement. Overall, these experiences led me to research questions that focused on developing a deeper understanding of how this first-generation community (re-)formed and utilized historically developed self-help structures in the context of resettlement and the supports and obstacles that influenced this process.

My trip to Thailand in 2014 also influenced my choice to focus on Karen women. During this trip, I was introduced to staff and leaders of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO). I found their work incredibly compelling, and I was struck by the

scope and variety of programs they had developed to support and empower Karen women and families in Burma and Thailand. This trip piqued my curiosity about how Karen women were organizing in resettlement. Although I had worked closely with Karen women leaders and was aware of the KCM Women's Committee (KCM–WC), I knew little about what KCM–WC committee did. This raised questions for me about what type of organizing work Karen women did in resettlement, how and why they organized, and how the resettlement process impacted their ability to organize. I engaged in a grounded theory study because there were no existing models or theories that I could draw on to understand these questions.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine the associational behavior of first-generation Karen women in resettlement. The broad, initial research questions I developed to guide this study were:

1. Why do Karen women organize in the Minnesota resettlement context?
2. What are their goals and purpose(s)?
3. What do they do/how do they organize to meet these goals?
4. What supports and constraints impact women's ability to organize in resettlement?

Overview of Approach

I used an exploratory qualitative design that drew on grounded theory and ethnographic methods to answer the above research questions. I conducted in-person interviews with 10 first-generation Karen women who were involved in Karen women's

groups in Minnesota, starting with KCM–WC and including Karen women's groups in churches. Guided by broad research questions, I initially asked participants exploratory questions about their goals for organizing, activities, and what structures or systems they had developed to help them meet their goals. I originally anticipated that women's activities would fit more closely with literature on women's community organizing and/or organizational theory. However, over the course of the interviews, "power" and capacity for self-help emerged as a theme and became a focus of ongoing data collection and analysis. I also began to discern social, cultural, and structural conditions that affected women's experiences of agency and capacity to help one another. This paper describes the experiences of these 10 Karen women. Guided by grounded theory methods, I developed a preliminary theory of power defined as Karen women's agency and capacity for self-help in resettlement that is grounded in their experiences.

Overview of the Dissertation

In the remainder of this chapter, I include definitions of important terms and present sociopolitical, historical, and cultural background information to contextualize the purpose and findings of this study. In Chapter 2, I review and discuss the relevant extant literature, including theoretical approaches applied to understand the processes through which refugee-background communities (re-)form associations in resettlement and the factors that impact their capacity for self-help. In Chapter 3, I detail the research methods I used in this study, including participant selection, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness. In Chapter 4, I present the findings and preliminary grounded theory that emerged from this study. In the final

Chapter 5, I discuss my findings in relation to the existing literature and the implications of this study's findings for social work practice, policy, and research. I also describe the limitations of the current study.

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of terms that are used throughout this paper.

Adaptation: "the way in which people learn to survive in a new sociocultural context" (Wijers, 2013, p. 75).

Informal association/refugee[1] *voluntary association:* sociocultural organization that is self-governing and self-regulating (Borman, 1984). *Informal* does not imply without mission, structure, or organization. Rather, I use it to refer to historical models of social organization utilized by refugee-background communities.

Formal organizations/Refugee community-based organizations: a nonprofit organization or other organization that is recognized and regulated by U.S. governmental authorities. The primary purpose of distinguishing between informal or voluntary associations and formal or nonprofit organizations in this paper is to distinguish between sociocultural organizational systems that are historically derived, which refugee-background communities bring with them to resettlement, and organizational structures that are developed to conform to Western models, which reflect the priorities of outside regulations and funders.

[1] I use the term *refugee* here to refer to the legal status of members at the time associations were established.

Refugee[2]*:* Someone who has been forced to flee their country of origin because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and are unable to return (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2015).

Resettlement: I use Valtonen's (2004) definition of *settlement*, a term more commonly used in Europe, defined as "the activities and processes of becoming established after arrival in the country of settlement" (p. 70). This term is broader than official U.S. definitions of successful resettlement, which focus on economic self-sufficiency. Using this broader term allows for exploration of participants' experiences and goals related to their own resettlement.

Background

Sociopolitical Background and Human Rights Abuses against Karen People

Karen people are an ethnic group from Burma,[3] who have experienced multiple waves of displacement because of persecution and human rights abuses by the Burmese military, known as the *tatmadaw*. Common human rights abuses that have been documented as experienced by Karen civilians have included forced relocation to

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[2] This is the legal definition of *refugee*. Notably, several authors have critiqued the overuse of this term for portraying 'refugeeness' as an all-encompassing, homogeneous identity and one that is associated with a deficit discourse. Terms like *people with refugee backgrounds* have been proposed as alternative terms (Ford, 2012), which are desirable because they suggest that the experience of being a refugee can be a strength (Dumbrill, 2008).

[3] In 1989, the ruling military junta changed the name of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma (Burma) to the Union of Myanmar (Myanmar) one year after a brutal repression of pro-democracy demonstrations (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Many countries and groups who do not recognize the legitimacy of the military regime still refer to the country as Burma (Fisher, 2012). Additionally, objections have been raised to use of Myanmar based on the ethnic supremacy implicit in the term. The Karen women that I interviewed used the term Burma, and I used this term throughout this dissertation to be consistent.

government-controlled sites, forced labor, forced portering[4], use of human landmine sweeps, destruction and burning of villages and crops, torture, rape, and use of landmines (Cook, Shannon, Vinson, Letts, & Dwee, 2015; Cusano, 2001; Fink, 2008; Oo & Kusakabe, 2010). Burmese military rule has limited freedoms and perpetuated immense poverty (Belak, 2002). A report by the Harvard Law School concluded that the Burmese military was guilty of crimes against humanity in the Karen State (Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic, 2014).

Scholars have argued that conflict and forced migration impact men and women differently (Gururaja, 2000; Oo & Kusakabe, 2010). Karen women have experienced multiple systems of oppression in Burma and Thailand based on their gender, ethnicity, and statelessness, and O'Kane (2006) described the condition of women in Burma as "extreme marginalisation" (p. 227). Many factors have influenced gender discrimination and oppression of Karen women over time, including patriarchal cultural norms[5], the influence of colonialism and Western missionaries, and the militarization of Burma and

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[4] Forced portering includes being forced to carry heavy military equipment through the jungle for the *tatmadaw*. Forced porters were also used as human mine sweeps, meaning they were forced to walk ahead of the advancing *tatmadaw* in order to set off any landmines that might be on the path (Delang, 2000).

[5] One is cautioned from assuming that patriarchal norms are solely a function of traditional Karen culture. Some Karen historians have referenced the pre-colonial period as a time when Karen women had more equality with men, including playing community leadership roles. For example, in pre-colonial Burma, Karen women served as spiritual leaders referred to as *Kaw K'saw Mu* ("Lords of the Land") who "were repositories of local knowledge and arbitrated in matters of justice" (Karen Women's Organization, 2010, p. 8). These organizational structures were replaced in 1886 by a colonial law that imposed a single organization structure on Karen society, which utilized village headmen and imposed male authority (Taylor, 2009). Western Baptist missionaries introduced norms of subordinate roles for women in the church (Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2006) and actively worked to suppress women's activity in churches (Womack, 2008). Buddhist principles have also introduced ideas of women's roles as subordinate within male leadership structures (KHRG, 2006), although both Buddhist and Baptist religious institutions have also offered women opportunities for social and educational development and some involvement in community institutions (Henry, 2013).

the Karen State (Belak, 2002; Henry, 2013; Karen Human Rights Group [KHRG], 2006; Womack, 2008; Women's League of Burma, 2006). The use of rape as a weapon of war by the *tatmadaw* and threats of sexual violence have also directly oppressed women, restricted their travel, and restricted their ability to be involved in community decision-making processes (Belak, 2002; Karen Women's Organization, 2007; Women's League of Burma, 2006).

At the same time that conflict restricts the rights of women, it also creates opportunities for their empowerment and taking on new roles that go beyond traditional gender roles. For example, as men are killed or imprisoned and society is disrupted, women take on new roles of leadership and new identities (Malseed, 2009). A few studies have described how women from Burma, including Karen women, have become increasingly organized and engaged in activism. For example, Karen women have taken on roles of head of household, income earners, and have also became village heads, which were traditionally held by men (Cusano, 2001; Karen Women's Organization, 2010; Oo & Kusakabe, 2010).

Establishing Self-Governance Structures in Burma

In all settings of displacement, Karen people have been described as exhibiting a high degree of organization, agency, and self-determination (Cusano, 2001; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Beginning in the precolonial period, Karen people's relationship to ruling state systems in Burma was characterized by self-governance and resistance to being ruled by competing kingdoms of other ethnic groups. In the last 60 years, resistance

has been to the legitimacy and authority of a centralized and militarized Burmese (Burman[6]) government (Scott, 2009).

Political community-based organizations (CBOs), primarily the Karen National Union (KNU), have played a central role in establishing a customary governance system in Burma, an independent Karen State, and advocating for political legitimacy of this system[7]. Henry (2011) defined *customary governance* as including "a range of forms of decision-making which are based in Karen communities but not formally integrated into the governing apparatus of any state or government" (p. 269). The KNU defines itself as the single, legitimate political organization representing all Karen people[8] (Cusano, 2001).

As Henry (2011) and other scholars have described, the social and political conditions in Burma have created opportunities for organizations like the KNU and other CBOs to gain political legitimacy in support of political change toward democratic ends. Specifically, oppression by the Burmese military government and failure to provide public goods for constituents have created opportunities for CBOs to gain support and

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[6] Burma is a diverse country that is home to over 135 ethnic groups, and Karen people are one of the eight largest ethnic groups (Karen Women's Organization, 2010). The largest ethnic group is the Burman, who make up 68% of the population, are primarily Buddhist, and are the ethnicity of the ruling party (Smith, 2007).

[7] Currently, the Karen resistance movement calls for recognition as an autonomous state within a federalized state structure rather than an independent nation state (Henry, 2011).

[8] The KNU is the largest and oldest customary governance organization in Burma, but its claim to Karen nationalism is not without challenge. For example, in 1995, the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army, which was composed of Buddhist members of the KNU who felt marginalized by the KNU's predominantly Christian leadership, defected from the KNU and sided with the *tatmadaw*. Their defection directly resulted in the fall of the KNU headquarters in Manerplaw and loss of significant areas of territory previously held by the KNU. This incident also challenged the KNU's claim to Karen nationalism (Cusano, 2001).

consensual legitimacy for resistance movements. Henry (2011) defined *consensual legitimacy* as "a quality of relationships which are built over time between a political organization and base communities" that has three key aspects: resistance to an unpopular government, providing assistance to meet immediate needs, and reciprocal communication with the community (Henry, 2011, p. 32). This type of governance is legitimized by popular support and requires a certain degree of representation and responsiveness to the needs of the base community. CBOs engage in extensive community organizing and relationship development to garner support, for example, to gain material support and military recruits from their constituents.

The legitimacy of the CBO also depends on their ability to construct and communicate an identity narrative for their base community, which, in the case of Karen people, is based on ethnonationalism (Henry, 2011). As a political organization, the KNU's system of customary governance runs several departments, including agriculture, breeding and fishery, education and culture, health and welfare, forestry, defense, foreign affairs, and others. It also includes a semiautonomous women's committee, the Karen Women's Organization, which is described below.

(Re-)Establishing Self-Governance Structures in Refugee Camps

For Karen people, prolonged displacement started "as an aberration" and has become "a constant way of life" (Cusano, 2001, p. 138; see also Horstmann, 2011). As such, (re-)establishing self-governance systems in settings of displacement has also become a way of life. By the time aid groups arrived in 1984 to assist Karen who had fled violence in Burma and crossed into Thailand, they found that the camps, which were

more like villages, were extremely well organized (Barron, 2004). A 20th anniversary report by the Thai–Burma Border Consortium (TBBC, 2004) recalled: “When the first large influx of refugees arrived in Thailand 20 years ago, visitors were surprised to discover that entire scattered communities had organized and were running their own affairs within days of their arrival” (Barron, 2004, p. 43). Eventually, Thai policies changed and Karen people were moved to larger, more restrictive refugee camps (Olivius, 2017).

However, Karen ethnic political structures continued to govern overall organization of the refugee camps in Thailand, with the exception of a camp commander, who was appointed by the Thai Ministry of the Interior (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). These structures were highly organized (see Appendix A) with democratically elected, central leadership held by the Refugee Committee (Border Consortium, 2012; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Under the Refugee Committees there were Camp Committees, who managed the day-to-day affairs within the camps, coordinated assistance from NGOs, communicated with the Royal Thai Government, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and Thai security, and employed hundreds of camp residents (Border Consortium, 2012). Karen leaders split the camps up geographically into sections, each with their own leadership, which made up Section Committees (Border Consortium, 2012).

The Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) and Karen Youth Organization (KYO) were permanent committees in the organizational structure of the KNU and refugee camp committees and represented the interests of women and youth (Border Consortium,

2012). These organizations provided social services, engaged in advocacy, and conducted training and workshops. Community Elder Advisory Boards also provided overall guidance to the refugee committee and camp committees (Border Consortium, 2012). This structure remained effective despite multiple challenges, including accommodating large waves of new arrivals, floods, and camp consolidations (Barron, 2004). Notably, Suter and Magnusson (2015) pointed out that the self-determination that ethnic groups from Burma were able to exercise in the refugee camps in Thailand took place within the broader context of lacking many basic rights, legal status, and Thai camp policies passed in the 1990s that forced more aid dependency (Suter & Magnusson, 2015).

Development of the Karen Women's Organization

The KWO has an official role in the KNU customary governance system in Burma. It was founded by the KNU in 1949 under the leadership of Daw Nita, wife of KNU founder Saw Ba U Gyi, and was reactivated in 1985 under the initiative of Naw Lah Po, the wife of KNU chairman, General Saw Bo Mya (Henry, 2013). Although the KWO was initially viewed as an auxiliary for supporting the KNU, it has grown into a political organization with significant autonomy (Harriden, 2012). The KWO elects its own leaders in all 7 districts within the territory of the KNU and in all sections in each refugee camp (Henry, 2013). The roles of the KWO have expanded from providing social welfare services to engaging in political activism. Their objectives are to promote empowerment of women in all spheres of life, including political empowerment, to promote Karen culture, and to care for Karen women and children (Karen Women's Organization, 2010). In 2010, their membership was 49,000 (Karen Women's

Organization, 2010). The development of the KWO as a political organization has been supported by participation in the international women's movement, including participation in U.N.-sponsored women's conferences such as the Beijing Conference in 1995 (Henry, 2013).

(Re-)Establishing Self-Governance Structures in Resettlement

The UNCHR officially began referring refugees from nine refugee camps in Thailand for third country resettlement in 2005 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014). Fifteen countries have accepted refugees from these camps for resettlement, with the US accepting the largest number (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). The majority (65%) of this group are of Karen ethnicity (Border Consortium, 2005). Karen people represent a 'pioneer' community in most resettlement countries because there were no existing Karen communities for the first wave of people arriving with refugee status to join (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Few studies have examined how Karen communities have (re-)established self-help systems in resettlement contexts or the factors that support and inhibit these processes. No studies have specifically looked at the organizing activities of Karen women in resettlement.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Use of Extant Literature in a Grounded Theory Study

The appropriate timing of the literature review in a grounded theory study has been debated by grounded theory scholars. Classic grounded theorists (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) argued for a "purer" form of induction and postponing the literature review until after completion of the data analysis to prevent the researcher from forcing data into pre-existing categories. More recent scholars argued that researchers can and should use the literature during data analysis, as long as they use it properly by taking a critical and reflective stance toward it (Holton, 2007; Lempert, 2007; Thornberg, 2012). Thornberg (2012) described *informed grounded theory* as based on the logic of abduction, where the researcher compares data with existing theories and research to find the best explanation for the findings.

In this study, I reviewed the literature at multiple points in the research process. In my initial literature review, not finding a theoretical framework or model that could be applied to understand the topic of this dissertation justified a grounded theory study to fill this gap. After I identified major categories in my data analysis, I went back and reviewed the literature with a narrower focus on literature related to the major categories and emerging theory. Lastly, informed by ecosystemic theory, I reviewed the literature on the sociopolitical, historical, cultural, and structural contexts that have shaped the experiences of Karen women, which is primarily included in Chapter 1. I reviewed all

literature with a critical lens, noting where it was consistent or inconsistent with my findings, rather than trying to fit my findings with existing literature.

Literature Review

This dissertation study focused on the (re-)formation of informal associations by Karen women, primarily KCM and KCM–WC, and the factors that influenced participants' experiences of agency and capacity to help each other during their initial wave of resettlement to the United States. Given the relatively recent arrival of this group to the United States, there is very little research documenting their experiences in resettlement, generally, how they have (re-)established historical self-help systems to meet their resettlement needs, or the supports or barriers that have impacted their formation of associations and ability to help one another. Only one study was identified that specifically looked at how Karen people (re-)formed ethnic associations in resettlement (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). This study focused on formal, government recognized and funded organizations, though the authors noted that these organizations grew out of voluntary associations that were established immediately upon the arrival of the first community leaders. Other studies with Karen people in resettlement have noted that Karen community networks played important roles in providing assistance to others in their community, but did not describe the processes through which these networks were (re-)formed (Harkins, 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Mitschke et al., 2011; Worland & Darlington, 2010). No studies were identified that explored the formation or activities of Karen women's associations or how Karen women helped each other in resettlement.

Given the limited research on this population, this literature review draws on a broader body of research conducted with other refugee-background groups. It also incorporates research on immigrant-background groups and formal organizations when it was relevant or when studies made vague distinctions between migrants, refugees, and immigrants or between formal organizations and informal associations. A discussion of challenges associated with inconsistent terminology is included.

In this literature review, I explore the extant literature examining the processes through which new refugee-background groups (re-)form ethnic associations to help each other and the social, cultural, and structural conditions that affect their agency and capacity to (re-)form these associations and help one another. Knowledge of the purposes and roles of informal associations and the factors that impact their formation and success is important for the design of resettlement interventions that promote the successful resettlement of new groups (Smith, 2013). Given the limited nature of existing research on this topic, numerous limitations and gaps in the current body of literature will also be discussed.

Research and Theoretical Approaches

Decades of research have documented that immigrant groups form associations in countries of settlement, including the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, and the UK (Katz & Bender, 1976; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). Their "collective welfare function" and the social, emotional, economic, information, and resettlement benefits they provide to their community are also well documented (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix, Baffoe, & Liguori, 2015; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013). However,

this significant body of literature is not an indication that immigrant associations are readily or always formed in resettlement. Rather, the formation, evolution, function, and effectiveness of associations are influenced by many factors. These include factors that are common to many groups and factors unique to particular communities in particular settings at particular times. External factors that impact their formation and functioning are related to the broader resettlement, political, and bureaucratic environments (Menjivar, 2000). Research to understand these factors has been conducted in the fields of refugee and migration studies, anthropology, political science, social work, and sociology. A number of research and theoretical approaches have been employed, including social network and social capital theories, other capital theories, and ethnographic and qualitative methods.

Social network and social capital theory. Much recent research has utilized social network and social capital theories to understand how organized associational networks formed, the benefits that derived from participation in these networks, and how networks were utilized to achieve certain outcomes. Definitions of social capital emphasize the connection between a community's social capital and their agency or capacity for collective action. Fukuyama (1995) defined social capital as, "the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organizations" (p. 10). Putnam (1995) defined it as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (p. 67). J. Coleman (1990) argued that "social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common; they all

consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure" (p. 302). Finally, Lin (2001) defined social capital as, "resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (p. 29).

The concept of social capital seeks to quantify the value of social relationships. As the name suggests, it derives from the economic concept of 'capital,' and examines the commodification of relationships for certain ends. In its original conception, social capital theory was developed to explain the structuration and perpetuation of class society and inequality (Bourdieu, 1986). More recent conceptions by Coleman (1998) and Putnam (2000) seek to understand social solidarity and constructions of community (Anthias, 2007). Studies of refugee-background and migrant communities most frequently draw on Coleman (1998) and Putnam's (1995; 2000) definitions of social capital to explore and explain social cohesion and refugee integration, including economic integration. This body of research is primarily concerned with integration, diversity, and multiculturalism—emphases of current public and policy debates (Anthias, 2007; Strang & Ager, 2010).

Social capital studies commonly distinguish between different types of relationships and their capacity to produce different resources. *Bonding capital* stems from social bonds, or bonding ties, which are defined as strong ties that include relationships within a group with common characteristics, values, trust, and norms (Putnam, 2000). In studies of people with refugee backgrounds, bonding ties are

generally described as relationships between co-ethnics[9] (Ryan, 2011). Dense, tight knit, bonding networks are often protectionist in nature (Woolcock, 2001) and provide crucial support when available resources are inadequate (Faas, Jones, Tobin, Whiteford, & Murphy, 2015).

In studies of refugee-background communities, relationships between these communities and the broader society are conceptualized as bridging and linking ties. Bridging and linking ties are weaker than bonding ties and are a way to access outside resources (Granovetter, 1983; Woolcock, 2001). *Bridging ties* are theorized as providing opportunities to access resources of another group (the heterophily principle) (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 2008). They are theorized as necessary for "getting ahead" for people who have few resources because resources among bonding ties tend to be at similar levels (the homophily principle) (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 2008; Putnam, 2000, p. 23). *Linking ties* refer specifically to connections with institutional and governmental organizations (Woolcock, 2001).

Social network theory has extended our understanding of the types of social networks that are (re-)created by refugee-background communities in resettlement (bonding, bridging, and linking), including refugee self-help networks (bonding). Definitions of social capital that draw on Coleman (1998) and (Putnam, 1995, 2000), in particular, highlight the role that community solidarity, social cohesion, and norms of trust and reciprocity play in network formation. Second, social capital theory has been

[9] Defining bonding and bridging ties as among and between co-ethnics is problematic to the extent that it essentializes dynamic and complex boundaries between ethnic communities.

useful for describing the types of resources that are mobilizable through different types of networks to meet different outcomes. In refugee studies, the outcomes are most often predefined by researchers and focus on refugee integration or economic self-sufficiency.

Third, social capital theory has been useful for distinguishing between *potential* and *actual* social capital. Although commonly conflated, scholars have argued that social networks and social capital are not equivalent concepts (Lin, 2008; Portes, 1998). Important theoretical distinctions have been made between potential capacity of social capital (access or availability of resources in the network) and its actual use (mobilization or use relative to an action) (Lin, 2008). In other words, there is a need to distinguish social cohesion or solidarity dimensions of social capital with their instrumental uses and effects (Anthias, 2007). In studies of refugee voluntary associations, this distinction suggests that the existence of relational networks and associations does not necessarily indicate their ability to be effective in helping their community. An understanding of this distinction suggests the importance of researchers examining not only the existence of sociocultural networks, but also of communities' capacity and ability to utilize them to achieve their outcomes and the barriers, resources, and supports that promote the actualization of potential bonding capital (Anthias, 2007; Cederberg, 2012).

Lastly, social capital research has identified complex relationships between bonding and bridging or linking capital. Studies have shown that a certain degree of bonding capital may be necessary to develop bridging capital, and that bonding capital can make up for low levels of other type of capital, such as cultural capital (Csedo, 2008; Erel, 2010). For example, community leaders and voluntary associations can play in

bridging roles in helping to access outside resources, such as information, that can then be distributed through bonding networks.

Cultural and familial capital theories. Bourdieu (1986) also conceptualized other types of capital, including cultural capital, which is defined as knowledge, educational or professional qualifications or credentials, or linguistic abilities relevant to and legitimized by a dominant culture. Cultural capital is related to other forms of capital, because some degree of cultural capital is necessary to develop bridging and linking ties to access outside resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Researchers have described that many pioneer refugee-background groups have had few opportunities to develop cultural capital relevant to their resettlement settings, which impacts their ability to help themselves and each other in this new context (Haines, Rutherford, & Thomas, 1981; Owusu, 2000; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Karen people, in particular, have been identified as a group with low cultural capital relevant to resettlement countries (Suter & Magnusson, 2015; Worland, 2015). Low levels of cultural capital have been identified as a barrier to refugee-background communities being able to access resources in the resettlement environment that would enable them to help themselves and each other (Smith, 2013).

Drawing on critical race theory, Yosso (2005) critiqued Bourdieu's conception of cultural capital as promoting a deficit-based view of communities of color and failing to acknowledge the knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by these groups, and proposed additional types of capital. She defined *familial capital* as "those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and

cultural intuition" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Kinship bonds, which are defined differently in each community, often extend far beyond blood relations. For example, Smith (2013) identified strong familial capital in her sample of Somali Bantu, which included community beliefs about communal responsibilities for providing mutual, which dated back to traditional, agrarian Bantu society.

Methods. The majority of existing research is qualitative, descriptive, and consists of cross-sectional snapshots of single communities in a single location. A few studies have collected survey data or constructed demographic profiles of communities and refugee associations or organizations and quantitatively examined associations between length of residence in resettlement, education, income, and associational or organizational participation (Grabb, Hwang, & Andersen, 2009; Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2005; Lacroix et al., 2015; Owusu, 2000). Comparative studies have been useful for analyzing the impact of structural obstacles and supports in the resettlement environment and other social policies. Overall, these types of studies incorporated nonrefugee groups (e.g., immigrants and asylees); focused on formal nonprofits rather than voluntary associations; and examined the role of these organizations specifically in relation to refugee integration.

Ethnographic approaches. Detailed ethnographies have been conducted to describe the formation, function, and life cycles of immigrant associations (e.g., Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918; see also literature review by Moya, 2005). However, the majority of these ethnographies were done on historically established immigrant groups, such as Polish and Jewish immigrants. More recently, ethnographic methods, including

participant observation, informal conversations, and document review continue to be incorporated into broader studies to understand important cultural and historical context related to the formation of refugee voluntary associations (Haines et al., 1981; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013; Worland & Darlington, 2010).

Historical approaches. A number of studies have identified that refugee voluntary associations established postmigration represented adaptations of historical social and self-help structures (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Moya, 2005; Owusu, 2000; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918; Wijers, 2013). Researchers have adopted historical lenses to identify and describe these ethnocultural social systems. For example, Owusu (2000) described the (re-)establishment of Ghanaian associations in Canada as “a transplantation of an age-old adaptive strategy among Ghanaian migrants” (p. 1175). Smith (2013) described how extensive clan and family affiliations functioned in Somali Bantu society and how they were necessary for survival. McMichael and Manderson (2004) also described how Somalis in Australia continued to organize around clan affiliations. Both authors also described how civil war and displacement began to erode social cohesion, trust, and some social institutions prior to this group’s resettlement (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Smith, 2013). Several recent studies have identified that Karen self-help structures in the United States, Sweden, and Australia "mirrored" the organizational models of structures utilized in Burma and Thailand, specifically, the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Churches (KKBC) (Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015; Suter & Magnusson, 2015; Worland, 2015, p. 149).

Sample

Populations. Most research in this area has been conducted with immigrants and with communities who have longer migration histories in their countries of settlement. However, a few studies were identified that focused on how pioneer, refugee-background communities organized to help each other in resettlement (Owusu, 2000; Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Studies were found on first-generation Karen, Somali Bantu, Vietnamese "boat people", Hmong, and Laotian communities during their initial resettlement periods. However, only a few of these studies explored sociocultural self-help structures on an organizational level; most looked at how individuals in these communities helped each other. Also, few explored the processes through which these communities adapted and (re-)established these structures in resettlement.

Organizational types. As mentioned, significant research has been on immigrant organizations that were formed in settlement settings for self-help and mutual aid (Katz & Bender, 1976; Radecki, 1979; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). The vast majority of this research has focused on the formation and role of formal organizations, including mutual assistance organizations and ethnic community-based organization, rather than voluntary associations (Piacentini, 2012). In forming formal, nonprofit organizations, refugee and immigrant-background communities adopt new practices and institutions, which are influenced by Western models and priorities. They represent alterations of historically based self-help systems, which are the focus of this study. Often, (re-)forming a voluntary association is the first step in establishing a nonprofit (Suter & Magnuson, 2015). The

functions of refugee nonprofits are strongly influenced by the priorities of government and other funding sources (Griffiths et al., 2005). Less research has focused on informal refugee-background associations and how communities utilize historically developed systems and structures to promote self-help.

Findings

The processes identified in the literature through which refugee-background communities (re-)built historical community self-help structures their impact on self-help capacity were complex, highly contextual, and depended on influences internal and external to communities. This review of the extant literature identified some factors that were common across different groups and others that were group specific. Factors included group characteristics, historical experiences, resettlement circumstances, culture, and policy and resettlement environments.

Length of residence. Refugee voluntary associations are often most active during the early resettlement period of new communities because of the important roles they play in meeting communities' resettlement needs, particularly for groups with low levels of skills, education, or credentials relevant to their resettlement context (i.e., their cultural capital; Borman, 1984). One quantitative study has documented this association. Owusu (2000) collected a systematic random sample of 100 Ghanaians in Toronto and surveyed them about their association behavior. He found that 82% of Ghanaians who had lived in Toronto for 1–3 years were members of Ghanaian associations, compared to only 15% of those who had been in Toronto for more than 10 years. Qualitative interview questions included in surveys illuminated the reasons associations were important in the earlier

years of resettlement, namely, that they met social and emotional needs by providing opportunities for socialization and met economic and practical that were greater among new arrivals. Survey data also indicated that low levels of education and income (associated with length of residence) were also associated with membership. Qualitative studies have also documented that refugee voluntary associations play crucial roles in meeting community resettlement needs in group's initial resettlement period (Owusu, 2000; Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015).

Community size. Conflicting research exists about whether having a "critical mass" of people impacted a community's ability to form an associational, suggesting that factors other than the number of people from the same nationality or ethnicity are important (Zetter & Pearl, 2000). For example, Shelley (2001) did not find evidence of an organized Vietnamese community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, whose population was around 2000, though he did find a well-organized Laotian community, whose population was only 600 more people. Additionally, Rynearson and DeVoe (1984) identified a well-organized Laotian community, whose size was less than 500 people. Shelley (2001) posited that while size alone may not determine associational formation, community size may impact a community's capacity to form an association and help one another because having fewer leaders, particularly those with cultural and bridging capital, may lead to volunteer burnout. Additionally, leaders may not have enough time to coordinate and staff an association and respond to community needs.

Physical proximity and geographic placement policies. Physical proximity and/or access to transportation was necessary for community members to gather and

participate in associations and also to be able to help each other. Survey data from Owusu's (2000) study of Ghanaian associations indicated that physical proximity was related to association membership. For example, 76% of respondents who lived in Ghanaian neighborhoods participated in associations, while only 36% of those who live lived in non-Ghanaian neighborhoods were active in associations. Owusu (2000) concluded that geographic proximity facilitated ease of communication and transportation related to association meetings and activities. The small Laotian community in Rynearson and DeVoe's (1984) study was resettled nearby each other in a small geographic area in St. Louis, Missouri. Resettlement agency records indicated that approximately 493 Laotians were resettled in a small area of the city, with 122 placed in the same apartment building. Laotians in this setting were able to maintain "an elaborate system of mutual and support" (p. 37) and physical proximity was an important factor determining their capacity to help one another. Lejukole (2008)found that living in close proximity enabled Southern Sudanese refugees to utilize historical socio-organizational systems, such as an informal rotating credit system, and to "rely on one another for day-to-day support" (p. 188).

However, most studies found that government policies that dispersed communities across cities and states disrupted existing community relationships and created challenges for forming associations and being able to help each other (Borman, 1984; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Haines et al., 1981; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Owusu, 2000; Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). One comparative study was identified that explored the formation of Karen and Somali refugee

organizations in Sweden (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). They noted that the establishment of strong Karen organizations and the lack of establishment of strong Somali organizations was partially the result of state-level geographic placement policies. These policies dispersed Somalis in small numbers to many geographic communities, while they tended to cluster Karen people in larger numbers in fewer geographic areas.

State geographic placement policies have been described as primarily concerned with political and logistical priorities, which included economic considerations rather than the impact on refugee community and family networks. Politically, these policies sought to distribute the financial "burden" of resettling refugees and prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves (Haines et al., 1981; Shelley, 2001). Studies also found that refugee resettlement agencies, who made official placement decisions and housing arrangements for newly arriving families, often placed families in locations where there were church sponsors who were willing to take financial responsibility for the family (Haines et al., 1981; Shelley, 2001). Within metro areas, families were also place in neighborhoods that were convenient for church sponsors (Borman, 1984; Shelley, 2001). For example, Shelley (2001) found that church sponsors in Milwaukee, Wisconsin often chose to place new families near other church members or where they could find affordable housing, rather than close to other Vietnamese families. Without the ability to get to each other, communities' relational networks and ethics of reciprocity were disrupted (Borman, 1984; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013).

Women, in particular, have been identified as more isolated and less connected to relational networks in resettlement than men because of traditional roles of child-rearing and home maintenance and because women were less likely to get drivers' licenses and have access to transportation (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Smith, 2013). The previously mentioned study of a Laotian community that was resettled in a small area noted that when women lived in close proximity and were able to connect to each other, they were able to maintain their social roles within cultural and religious systems (Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984).

Level of resources. Unsurprisingly, the level of resources community members have to share with each other impacts their ability to help each other (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Menjivar, 2000; Smith, 2013). Limited economic resources and poverty impacted people's ability to share resources with others in need in their community. In addition to economic resources, research has also documented a lack of knowledge and information resources relevant to the resettlement context, or cultural capital, among many new refugee-background communities (Haines et al., 1981; Owusu, 2000; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). This finding is evidence of the homophily principle, which states that the level of resources among bonding ties tend to be at similar. At the same time, a few studies have identified that when resources are accessed or become available, they can be distributed efficiently through bonding networks (McMichael & Manderson, 2004).

(Re-)building community associations. A small number of studies found that (re-) forming sociocultural and associational structures in resettlement increased a

community's capacity for self-help and the creation of social capital. First, associations advanced goals of shared survival and prosperity and played a unifying role (Shelley, 2001). Second, they facilitated relational connections among community members, in other words, supporting the development of bonding times and bonding capital (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015). Third, they enabled communities to utilize "highly structured and well-organized" sociocultural systems for self-help, such as community banking systems (Smith, 2013, p. 182).

Community diversity and social cohesion. The level of intracommunity homogeneity or diversity are commonly thought to affect the formation of refugee voluntary associations and a community's willingness to help each other. Diversity is defined by indicators of ethnicity, language, religion, economic or social class status, tribe, culture/subculture, or other differences that define people of the same nationality. In the social capital literature, intragroup diversity is often described as impacting social cohesion and norms of trust within a community (Putnam, 1995, 2000).

For example, Owusu (2000) described that the Ghanaian community in Toronto was characterized by significant diversity, and that the existence of many Ghanaian organizations in Toronto reflected the number of tribes. McMichael and Manderson (2004) similarly found that Somali associations that did exist in Australia were organized along clan lines. Lacroix et al. (2015) found that a Sudanese organization split into two organizations following the political events in Sudan of 2011, when the new country of Southern Sudan was formed. Shelley (2001) also suggested that differences in culture, social class, and immigration waves in the Vietnamese community may have been a

reason this community was not organized or engaged in helping each other. Notably, he also suggested that the Vietnamese in Milwaukee may have been a self-selecting group, who moved there because they did not want to be a part of a larger Vietnamese community.

Several authors have cautioned that the tendency to organize around subgroups should not be interpreted as indicating that groups are prejudiced against each other, although premigration political allegiances and resentments do certainly play out between community members in resettlement (Cederberg, 2012; Portes, 1998). Subgroups can be tolerant and also supportive of each other (Shelley, 2001). For example, Owusu (2000) found that although Ghanaians organized around tribal affiliations, these organizations collaborated on larger, political issues affecting the broader Ghanaian community. Lacroix et al. (2015) found that after the Sudanese organization split into two organizations, they continued to affiliate and collaborate with each other.

Community diversity may also impact a group's capacity to form associations and help each other in practical ways. Dispersal placement policies that fail to consider existing community networks in making placement decisions group people together based on broad nationality or ethnic descriptors. However, these people may have no previous relationships, and may speak different dialects or languages. Shelley (2001) described the effect of geographic dispersal policies on Vietnamese people as "basically throwing strangers . . . together with strangers (p. 481). At the same time, Elliott and Yusuf (2014) found that community associations were one mechanism through which Somalis who were "strangers upon arrival in New Zealand" could (re-)build social

cohesion and community connections that were disrupted in the resettlement process (p. 105). Overall, the relationships between community diversity, norms of reciprocity and trust, and willingness to share limited resources and help each other likely variables that are unique to each community. Ethnographic exploration is required to understand these subtleties as well as cultural dynamics of help-seeking and help-giving behavior.

Premigration experiences. As noted, premigration experiences can impact norms of trust and reciprocity within a community and thus their willingness to associate and help each other in resettlement. In fact, government and military authorities often target intragroup trust and cohesion in efforts to break a community's resistance efforts (Lacroix et al., 2015; McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Intragroup tensions and violence may also be the defining feature of a conflict that has produced refugees, as was the case with the Somali, Sudanese, and Liberian civil wars (Lacroix et al., 2015; McMichael & Manderson, 2004). These experiences undoubtedly continue to impact community cohesion in the resettlement setting.

Second, conditions in refugee camps also impact a community's ability to (re-)establish socio-organizational structures in resettlement. Suter and Magnusson (2015) utilized Mahoney's (2008) framework in their explanation of why the Karen community in Sweden was comparatively more organized than the Somali community. This framework described four domains or characteristics of refugee camp settings that impacted collective action of refugees in camps. The four domains were: human security context, socioeconomic context, cultural and community context, and duration context. They described that, relative to other refugee camps, camps in Thailand had relatively

high levels of access to food, water, shelter, security, education, and freedom to move in and out of the camp; had intact, relatively homogeneous communities; and had lived in the camps for a longer duration (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Relative to other refugee camps in the world, these conditions supported educational, political, economic, and social collective action in the camps in Thailand, which supported formalization of community-based organizations and refugee-led leadership. Notably, Suter and Magnusson (2015) caution that this self-determination still takes place within the broader context of lacking many basic rights, including legal status. Additionally, they note that Thai camp policies passed in the 1990s have forced more aid dependency (Suter & Magnusson, 2015).

Lastly, to the extent that refugee voluntary associations in resettlement represent adaptations of historically developed sociocultural structures and systems, understanding of these systems premigration has provided important context for understanding associational and self-help behavior in resettlement (Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015; Worland & Darlington, 2010).

Relevant to this dissertation, five studies were identified that focused on women's organizing in Burma and/or Thailand and included Karen women. Studies included four book chapters and one Master's level thesis, which is incorporated given the limited research in this area. One qualitative case study specifically explored Karen women's collective agency to organize and participate in customary governance systems in Burma and Thailand, primarily through the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) (Henry, 2013). Three additional qualitative studies interviewed women activists from Burma,

which included Karen women, about their organizing, activism, and the impact of gender relations (Anderson, 2014; O'Kane, 2006; Snyder, 2011). The master's level thesis explored the role of women in peacebuilding and the capacities and lived experiences of women activists on the Thailand–Burma border who were involved with the Women's League of Burma, including Karen women (Anderson, 2014).

These studies suggest that amidst significant challenges and sources of disempowerment, Karen women have been able to establish organizations and engage in individual, collective, and political empowerment. Connections to the international women's movement provided legal structures for justice, gave women more power and legitimacy to advocate on local and national levels, and provided ideas and resources (Anderson, 2014; Henry, 2013; O'Kane, 2006). Consciousness-raising activities, education, and capacity building trainings by women's organizations also led to increased skills, knowledge, and self-confidence and were related to women's capacity and perceptions of power to engage in activism (Henry, 2013; O'Kane, 2006; Snyder, 2011).

Henry (2013) also found that having an organizational structure, the KWO, provided opportunities to promote women in leadership, advocate and support the inclusion of women in leadership roles at the local level, network with the KNU and other NGOs to promote the inclusion of Karen women, and network with international NGO to gain support and resources for their work. Having organizational autonomy was also important for Karen women to demonstrate their skills and value to their broader community and other organizations (Henry, 2013). Lastly, women were motivated to engage in women's advocacy because of their personal experiences with injustice

(O'Kane, 2006). Factors that constrained women's participation in women's organizations included family responsibilities related to traditional gender roles, sexist organizational cultures, resistance to women's organizing efforts, and physical dangers associated with women traveling in conflict settings (Henry, 2013; Snyder, 2011).

This small amount of existing research indicates that Karen women have a history of organizing in settings of conflict and displacement to promote their own empowerment and to address the sources of extreme marginalization. However, little is known about how they have been able to continue their organizing efforts in resettlement or how the resettlement context has impacted their efforts. No research to date has looked at why, how, and with what success Karen women have organized in the resettlement context.

Limitations and Gaps in the Literature

There are numerous gaps and limitations in this area of study. Gaps are related to a lack of consistent terminology, inherent limitations in the dominant discourse, a lack of well-developed theory, study designs, sample characteristics, and a general lack of studies on this topic.

Lack of consistent terminology. Research has used various terms to describe the organizations formed by refugee-background groups, for example, grassroots associations, ethnic[10] community-based organizations, ethnic associations, mutual assistance associations, common interest groups, refugee associations, refugee

[10] Ethnicity is a complex and contested concept (Anthias, 2007) that is most commonly, yet problematically used to identify organizations and associations founded by newer immigrant and refugee-background groups. Use of the term *ethnic* is also used with hesitation because it makes a false distinction, implying that mainstream, existing, and/or European-American organizations are without an ethnic or cultural heritage.

organizations, refugee-based organizations, and refugee community organizations. There are no agreed upon definitions of what constitutes each type of organization, though scholars agree that there are meaningful differences (Babis, 2014; Griffiths et al., 2005; Moya, 2005). For example, Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) argued, "Formal and informal organizations are not the same. They do not have the same goals, the same continuity or the same leadership" (p. 825). Perhaps it would be most useful to think of refugee self-help efforts on a continuum from completely informal and without systematic organization on one end, such as neighbors helping neighbors, to formal organizations recognized and regulated by governmental authorities in resettlement countries, such as nonprofits. Figure 1 depicts an example of such a continuum:

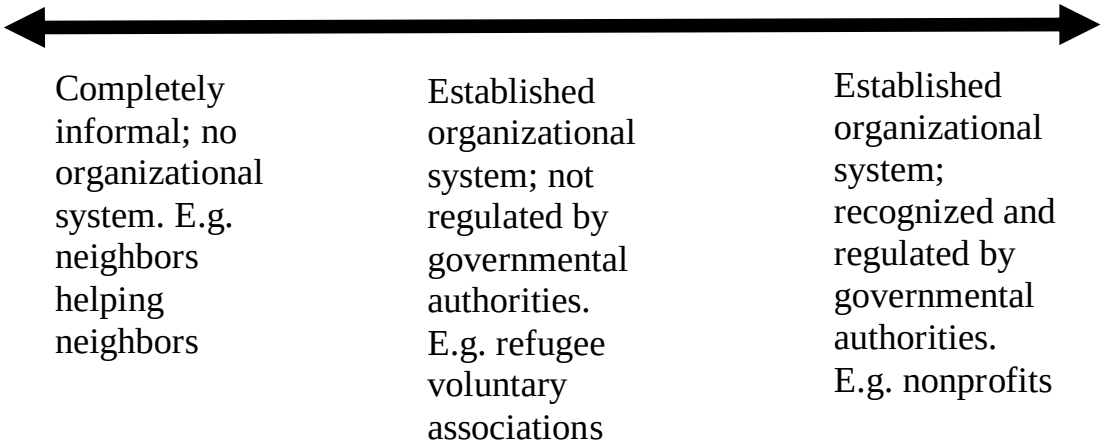

Figure 1. Continuum of refugee organizational systems and types.

In this dissertation, I distinguish between formal organizations, defined as nonprofits or organizations that are registered with a government, and refugee voluntary associations, defined as organized groups that have not obtained nonprofit status and are

not registered with or regulated by governmental authorities. I am interested in voluntary associations because they represent the strategies, systems, and structures that are indigenous to each group, whereas formal organizations represent adaptations to Western models. Forming a nonprofit or government-recognized organization requires specific knowledge and skills relevant to the resettlement context and may take time to establish, whereas indigenous sociocultural structures are theoretically more readily utilizable upon a group's arrival (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Voluntary associations are also far more numerous than formal nonprofit organizations (Williams, 2006). Additionally, voluntary associations that are (re-)established when new groups first arrive can later be adapted to nonprofits, as Karen associations were in Sweden (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). In sum, at this time, the plethora of terms and lack of definitional clarity represent major limitations to knowledge production in this area.

Dominant discourse in research with refugee-background communities. Dominant discourse on people with refugee backgrounds in resettlement has tended to be framed by notions of victimhood, dependency, and passivity (Malkki, 1996). This research is primarily conducted from the perspectives of professional refugee resettlement staff, is focused on services done *to* refugee-background communities, rather than what is done *by* them, and relies on top-down policy definitions of successful resettlement (Bird, Brough, & Cox, 2012; Valtonen, 2004). However, a growing body of work is beginning to emphasize the voices and perspectives of people with refugee backgrounds and their agency and active role in their own resettlement, to which this current study adds (Bird, 2013; Kutty, 2010).

Theory. While social network and social capital theories are helpful for describing networks and connections, there is a lack of research that goes beyond describing the existence of networks to examining the quality and value of social relationships, the actual resources that are mobilizable through these networks, and the end effects or outcomes of this mobilization (Anthias, 2007; Ryan, 2011). Additionally, there is a lack of research that examines the value of these relationships and resources within their cultural context (Anthias, 2007; Cederberg, 2012). In current research, social capital has most commonly been examined in relation to outcomes that are predefined by researchers and represent the priorities of government resettlement programs, most commonly, integration and economic self-sufficiency (Cederberg, 2012).

Second, social network and social capital research too often take networks for granted and do not describe *how* communities (re)form and maintain different networks and structures, including their reasons for forming them (Bourdieu, 1986; Ryan, 2011). As a result, research and practitioners often taken for granted that refugee background groups have access to supportive networks, which fails to consider context and structural factors related to displacement and resettlement that impact these communities' ability to make bonds, bridges, and links (Fine, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Wierzbicki, 2004).

Social capital theory is also inherently limited in its application to migrant communities, because it focuses on networks and relationships that are durable or relatively stable (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). According to social capital theory, mobility is considered to be a barrier to accessing and maintaining social capital. However, refugees' networks are characterized as dynamic and mobility is a

common feature (Boyd, 1989; Ryan, 2011). Social networks of migrants have, in fact, been described as a "special case" (Eve, 2010, p. 1236). Thus, while social capital theories are useful for providing cross-sectional descriptions of refugee networks, they are inherently limited for understanding their dynamic, evolving, and transnational nature across multiple settings.

Lastly, feminist critiques of social capital theory have also been raised, namely that it ignores intragroup power dynamics and women's differential access to benefits through community institutions (Anthias, 2007; Crowley & Hickman, 2008; Edwards, 2004; Ryan, 2007). For example, McMichael and Manderson (2004) found that Somali community associations in Australia were predominantly run by men and that women had less access to resources through these and other religious associations. Furthermore, women's networking strategies may be different than men's and occur more in the private rather than public sphere (Edwards, 2004; Ryan, 2007; Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005).

Study designs. As noted, the majority of existing research is qualitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional. There are a lack of quantitative studies and comparative studies in this area. Quantitative studies would be useful for understanding the effects of different factors on associational formation and capacity for self-help. Comparative studies of Karen communities in different locations would be useful for identifying the effects of environmental factors. Surveys could also be utilized to create profiles of different Karen communities in the United States, including their size, location, different demographic characteristics, and the types of associations they have formed or not

formed. Given the number of known barriers to associational formation, there is also a notable lack of negative case analyses. In other words, there are few studies of communities that did not form associations. Survey data would be useful for identifying these locations. Lastly, most existing research is dehistoricized and begins with refugees in resettlement (Moya, 2005). These studies treat people with refugee backgrounds as *tabula rasa*, and risk missing the extent to which resettlement strategies represent continuities and adaptations of premigration strategies developed in response to displacement (Moya, 2005).

Sample characteristics. The majority of research in this area has been conducted with immigrants rather than refugees, and/or groups refugees into broader categories of immigrant, migrant, or asylee. These groups may be very different than refugee-background communities in terms of historical experiences of persecution, displacement, immigration status, economic resources, and their ability to develop cultural capital relevant to the settlement country. Additionally, most research has been conducted with communities that have longer migration histories, and few studies have focused on how pioneer, refugee-background communities organized to help each other in resettlement (Owusu, 2000; Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015).

Most existing research has also been conducted with formal, nonprofit refugee organizations (Piacentini, 2012). There is a lack of research on voluntary associations as they are defined in this study, although voluntary associations are far more common than formal organizations (Williams, 2006). One reason for this gap is that informal systems and structures often function “under the radar” or beyond the control of outside

institutions (McCabe, Phillimore, & Mayblin, 2010) and are often unknown to outsiders, including resettlement professionals, researchers, and policy makers (Borman, 1984; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Smith, 2013).

Third, existing research has generally been conducted with organizations or associations that were already established; there is a gap in knowledge about the processes of their formation, including the barriers that may prevent their formation (Ryan, 2011). Lastly, there is a lack of research on associational behavior of refugee-background women, and Karen women, in particular. This is despite the fact that it has been documented that women experience war and resettlement differently (Gururaja, 2000; Oo & Kusakabe, 2010), have different ways of organizing (Edwards, 2004; Mizrahi, 2007; Ryan, 2007; Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005), and have different access to voluntary associations (McMichael & Manderson, 2004). The lack of research on voluntary associations also contributes to gaps in knowledge about the activities of women, since they tend to play more important roles in informal organizations and leadership (Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005).

Conclusion and Justification for Grounded Theory Study

Existing research indicates that associations formed in resettlement by refugee-background communities are complex, dynamic, and constantly shifting in purpose and function over time. Their formation, evolution, and dissolution are influenced by the resettlement setting as well as historical experiences, by internal factors related to community characteristics, and by external factors related to political and social policies.

A small amount of existing research has documented that Karen women have a history of organizing in settings of conflict and displacement to address sources of their marginalization. However, little is known about how they have been able to continue their organizing efforts in resettlement or how the resettlement context has impacted their efforts. No research to date has looked at why, how, and with what success Karen women have organized in the resettlement context. Because no theoretical framework or model was identified in existing research or theory that could be applied to understand the topic of this dissertation, a grounded theory study was justified.

This current study contributes to a gap in the literature by contributing knowledge and grounded theory about the specific processes through which first generation Karen women have (re-)established self-help associations in resettlement and factors that impacted their agency and capacity for self-help. It also contributes ethnographic knowledge of the cultural context within which these processes took place. Data was collected from the perspectives of women, who were part of the first wave of arrivals from a recent, 'pioneer' resettlement community. Using grounded theory and ethnography, it explored women's self-defined goals, definitions, and meaning.

Chapter 3

Methods and Procedures

This section describes the theoretical perspectives and study design that guided this qualitative study as well as specific procedures, including participant selection, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations

Design

This study combined the critical perspectives of feminist epistemology as a sensitizing lens with the methodological goals of constructivist grounded theory and ethnography to qualitatively explore Karen women's experiences of power defined as agency and capacity for self-help.

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative inquiry adopts an interpretivist theoretical paradigm, which privileges participants' subjective voices, views, and meanings (Creswell, 2013). It is useful for exploring and providing in-depth description of concepts and phenomenon that are not well understood (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative inquiry allowed me to draw on the personal and professional knowledge and experience I have gained through 13 years of working with Karen people in Minnesota. It also provided methods for paying attention to the ways in which these experiences biased my observations and interpretations. Throughout the ongoing interviewing and analysis, I was explicit about examining my own questions, biases, and views of the interview relationship and how it may have impacted the research process.

Feminist Epistemology as a Sensitizing Lens

Feminist research is primarily concerned with the production of knowledge about the lives and experiences of women through their perspectives and points of view and in its social context (Reinharz, 1992). I initially designed this study to incorporate feminist qualitative inquiry for several reasons. First, this study is explicitly concerned with Karen women's subjective voices, experiences, perspectives, and meanings. It sought to fill a gap in existing research by focusing on the voices of Karen women and to develop a theory that was grounded and contextualized in the experiences of Karen women, rather than deducing from existing theories that are dominated by male and Western perspectives and ways of knowing. Furthermore, Karen women are a group that have been severely oppressed and persecuted for generations, and I sought to use an approach that attended to issues of power on multiple levels, including in the interview process. Originally, I hoped to use interviews to create space for emancipatory conversations about power as women struggled to understand their position within the structures of a new society, and to empower participants through the process of this research study.

However, while feminist and emancipatory research paradigms provided sensitizing lenses and framed my thinking about power and knowledge from the perspectives of women, I was not able to apply them as research methodologies in this study. While I did talk to women about their ideas and experiences related to power and knowledge, bringing a critical lens to understanding in order to engage in emancipatory dialogue proved difficult. My previous experience interviewing Karen people and feedback from my cultural consultant sensitized me to the fact that many participants

were unfamiliar with Western-style interview processes. Using too many probing and clarifying questions could be perceived as interrogative and make participants feel like they were not answering correctly or shut down. This dynamic introduced challenges to encouraging deep reflection and understanding meaning in cultural context, generally. Interviews therefore primarily focused on creating space where women were open to sharing their experiences. Given these cultural and power dynamics, introducing a critical lens to understanding necessary for emancipatory dialogue did not feel appropriate or acceptable. In other words, the goals of comprehension and critique proved incompatible and presented barriers to engaging in emancipatory dialogue in this cultural context of this study.

I was also not able to achieve the feminist research goal of mitigating power differentials inherent in dominant research paradigms by empowering research participants in the process of social inquiry. Though I interviewed some women who had been in the United States for more than 10 years, common language in English or Karen that could facilitate understanding Western research processes was not available. Establishing common language about research and its role in consciousness-raising and empowerment was beyond the scope of this dissertation study. Therefore, I could not engage women as fully actualized partners in the research process at this time. However, because this study took place within the context of long-term, reciprocal relationships I have with this community that go beyond research, it provided an opportunity for shared experiences that we can draw on in the future to develop common language and

understanding about participatory, empowering, and action-oriented research. As such, it is a first step toward a longer-term goal of being able to cocreate knowledge over time.

Grounded Theory Methods

Grounded theory methods were a new methodological strategy introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) in response to what they perceived as over-reliance on deductive, positivist, and quantitative methods by researchers in the fields of sociology and psychology in the 1960s (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory methods are also useful for exploring processes that are not well understood and when there is a lack of existing theories that can be drawn upon to understand a social process (Creswell, 2013).

Consistent with feminist epistemology, grounded theory focuses on meaning, the symbols people use to convey meaning, and emphasize that understanding of reality is socially constructed (Blumer, 1969). Grounded theory allows an understanding of concepts and theories to emerge through data analysis and is described as an "open-minded, framework-free orientation to research" or "theoretically agnostic" approach that is not guided by a priori theories or frameworks (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 18). Initial, broad research questions are modified in response to insights that emerge from the data analysis. In this way, understanding of concepts and theory are developed inductively and grounded in the voices, perspectives, and experiences of participants. The data itself provides examples to illustrate the emerging theory.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to develop a preliminary, substantive theory of Karen women's power to help each other in resettlement that responds to an

almost complete gap in research with Karen women in resettlement. Glaser and Strauss (1967) described that substantive theory is relevant to a specific, substantive area of inquiry, and Glaser (2007) described substantive theory as useful for directing development of categories, properties, and relationships that may eventually lead to development of formal theory. In this study, I primarily drew on Charmaz's work on constructivist grounded theory methods because it privileges participants' understandings and meaning systems, approaches research as mutual enquiry between researchers and participants, and interrogates the role of the researcher in the research process (Charmaz, 2014).

Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic methods are designed to explore processes in their naturalistic settings, to explore culturally grounded terms and concepts with participants, and to understand participants' actions and perceptions within their cultural context (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007). They are sensitive to the cultural context, meanings, and behaviors. Integrating ethnographic methods in this study, including the use of cultural consultants, member checking, and techniques for exploring cultural terms, symbols, and processes during data collection and analysis enhanced the study, because it provided tools for exploring social processes within a particular cultural context that was significantly different from my own.

Complementariness of Grounded Theory and Ethnographic Methods

Grounded theory and ethnographic methods are methodologically and theoretically complementary and useful in research for theory development within a

cultural context (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007). The limitations of each method are complemented by the strengths of the other (Barnes,1996). Recent conceptions of grounded theory have lost the original focus on ethnography and pay little attention to culture (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007). For example, Charmaz (2014) spends one page total on the topic of "collecting data and cultural contexts" (pp. 330–331) and two pages total on describing "the centrality of language" (pp. 331–333). Although Charmaz (2014) recognizes that "grounded theorists have given scant attention to how the structure and content of languages can affect inquiry" (p. 331), ultimately, this text alone provided limited guidance on the complexities of conducting research across culture and language. Ethnographic methods provided a lens for attending to culture as well as methodological safeguards for cross-cultural research. Grounded theory methods also offer a systematic method of inquiry that can move an ethnographic study from description to deeper levels of abstraction and analysis, facilitate the development of theory, and provide guidelines for connecting the theory to the existing literature (Charmaz, 2014; Timmermans & Tavory, 2007).

Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

Power and the Research Relationship with Participants

As a white, educated woman, I was aware of inherent power differentials in my study related to relationships of researcher/participant, Western/Asian, race, class, culture, language, etc. and the potential for this research to be exploitive. For example, I am aware that I receive a great deal of automatic respect and often deference from Karen people, who call me *tharamu*, a term of respect that means "teacher." Based on my

experience interviewing Karen people, I also knew that most participants would be unfamiliar with the context of a Western research interview, and that there was potential that some could experience it as similar to an interrogation. I also knew that participants might give answers based on what they thought I wanted to hear and might be hesitant about sharing different perspectives or information. Furthermore, I knew that women might not feel comfortable turning down an invitation to participate in this study, even if they were not interested in being involved. Lastly, I was aware of epistemological limitations inherent in cultural and linguistic translation that stemmed from my inability to communicate in Karen language.

I took all of these things into consideration in the design of this study. I worked with my interpreter/cultural consultant to develop interview questions that would be easiest to understand for participants. I let participants know that there were no right or wrong answers, and that I was genuinely interested in hearing their experiences and ideas. I gently probed for greater detail in their responses so that participants did not get the impression that they were doing something wrong by not answering the questions 'correctly.' Lastly, I met with my interpreter/cultural consultant frequently throughout the research process and asked for her feedback about my interview style, how she thought it was perceived by participants, and any suggestions she had for how we could better create a dynamic of trust and open dialogue with participants. Additional steps I took to protect participants' information and to ensure the study was not exploitive or coercive are discussed below under "protection of participants." Overall, while I made all efforts possible to reduce the gaps that inherently exist in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic

research, this study should be regarded as one perspective on these women's experiences, which recognizes the epistemological limitations above.

The Role of Action in Research: Research as Help

Prior to conducting this research project, I was keenly aware of the overuse of this community in an unethical way for research purposes, which also impacted my view of my role as a researcher. Based on many conversations with Karen friends and colleagues, I came to understand that many Karen people agreed to participate in research because they thought it would help their community. I also share this understanding, that the research relationship should be reciprocal and benefit communities who participate. Throughout the research process, although I had my own ideas, I did not presume to understand what participants thought would be helpful to their community. I inquired and remained open to participants' ideas about how they thought this research could be helpful to Karen women in Minnesota. Additionally, because my relationships with many participants extend beyond this study and the context of research, we have continued to partner to develop and adapt interventions that build on the insights of this research.

Specific Procedures

Selection Criteria and Recruitment

Initial recruitment is used with grounded theory methods as "a point of departure" to begin data collection (Charmaz, 2006, p.100). Given that the original intention of the study was in-depth understanding of the organizational behavior and activities of Karen women, a purposeful sampling design was used. Purposeful sampling included selecting potential participants who were best able to help me understand the topic of the research (Creswell, 2014). The initial sample for this study included Karen women who were (a)

aged 18–80, (b) who had experience working with a Karen women's organization, and (c) who spoke Karen and/or English.

With the help of two cultural consultants, I generated a list of key informants that met these criteria and noted their level of English. I contacted potential participants by phone, email, or Facebook messenger (see Appendix B for recruitment script). If potential participants had limited English fluency, I called them using my interpreter. If potential participants were willing to learn more about the study, I scheduled a time to meet with them and with my interpreter, if requested. I offered to provide an interpreter for the interview to all participants.

One person that I recruited to participate in the study initially agreed, but we were unable to find a convenient time to meet. No one else that I invited to participate in the study declined to participate. Two participants that I contacted for a follow up interview were travelling out of the country and therefore unavailable to conduct a follow up interview. Since I have worked closely with this community for over a decade, I knew many of the women that I recruited to participate in this study. I had worked previously with six of them in professional or volunteer roles, and four were completely unknown to me prior to recruiting them for this study.

In grounded theory methods, recruitment during the research process becomes increasingly narrow and focused on generating data to develop and fill in gaps in understanding in the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). Because the theory that began to emerge was related to loss of power, authority, and agency to organize and help each other when they came to the United States, I narrowed my sampling to women who could

provide specific knowledge about concepts and relationships related to power and agency. For example, I recruited one participant because she worked in a setting where she assisted families with *family problems*, which was identified previously by participants as an area where they felt like they had little power, and I wanted to understand how she experienced power in relation to helping Karen families with this issue as well as in interacting with U.S. systems. I recruited another participant because she was identified as one of the only Karen women who intervened with families who were experiencing domestic violence and I thought she might have a different experience of power to intervene in those situations. When I recognized that comparing experiences in Burma or Thailand and Minnesota was a strategy to understand experiences of power and agency in resettlement, I recruited two additional participants who had significant experience in both settings and could comment about the comparisons earlier participants had made.

During data collection, I also narrowed my sample to first generation refugees (excluding one and a half or second-generation participants). The reason for this decision was that initial participants described differences between first and second-generation arrivals in relation to their motivation to organize. Exploring how organizing practices changed between first- and second-generation refugees added a layer of complexity that went beyond the scope of the theory that was developing.

Grounded theory methods generally sample until theoretical saturation, or when no new insights or properties of core categories emerge (Charmaz, 2006). Dey (1999) critiqued the term *saturation* for suggesting that all possible data has been collected, and

suggested theoretical *sufficiency* as a more accurate descriptor. In this study, I felt that I had reached adequate sufficiency at the time I stopped sampling. However, the decision to stop sampling for this study was also impacted by a tragic event that intersected with the timeline of my study. Four Karen women leaders were in a car accident that resulted in the death of one woman. It would have been inappropriate to request interviews for my study during a time when this community was grieving and healing. As such, although I had planned to complete a focus group with a subset of participants, this was no longer possible after the tragedy.

Protection of Participants

When I invited potential participants to learn more about the study, I created an opportunity for them to indirectly decline. For example, I said, "I know that you are very busy with your family and work. It is okay if you do not have time to talk with me right now. You can call me when you have more free time." In general, I found participants to be very willing to talk to me. When I met with potential participants, I introduced myself and reviewed the consent form in depth, with an interpreter, if requested. The consent included information about the background of this study, specific procedures, risks and benefits of participating, compensation, confidentiality, mandatory reporting, the voluntary nature of the study, and contact information if they had further questions or complaints about the study (see Appendix C). Compensation was a $25 gift card to Kmart for every interview completed. I gave participants a copy of the consent that was translated into English and Karen. I also gave them an opportunity to ask questions that they had or for clarification, and I reiterated that participation was voluntary. If they

agreed to participate in the study, I gave them the option to sign or not to sign the consent form, and I proceeded with the interview. I also obtained participants' consent for the interview to be audio recorded.

Upon enrollment in my study, participants were assigned a participant ID number that was used in all future documents. I recorded names and contact information for the purpose of following up with participants during the course of the study in a document on a password protected server and a password protected computer. I destroyed the document with direct identifiers after the study was completed. All data was kept on a secure, password protected server. Audiotapes were deleted after transcription. Identifying information was removed from transcripts. Signed consent forms were kept in a locked cabinet in a locked office and were kept separate from the data. Consent forms contained nothing that connected them to the data.

The following steps were taken to protect privacy when an interpreter was used in an interview. Only a professional interpreter was used for all interviews, and the same interpreter was used in all interviews. She works in a medical setting and has completed training on the protection of privacy and confidentiality in professional interpreting. She signed a confidentiality agreement prior to beginning the study, and confidentiality was reviewed during the consent process. IRB approval for this study was obtained from the University of Minnesota in September 2017.

Participants

Participants ranged in age from 32 to 60 years old. All participants were married and had children. Participants were first generation refugees and all were born in Burma,

lived as refugees in Thailand, and resettled to the United States. All participants were involved with Karen or Burmese women's organizations in Burma or Thailand before coming to the United States except one, who stated that she was too young at the time. All participants had experience working with a Karen women's organization in Minnesota, including with the Karen Community of Minnesota Women's Committee (KCM–WC) and/or women's organizations in Karen churches. Many participants had multiple leadership roles in different settings, for example, they were elected to leadership positions in the KCM–WC and their church. All participants arrived directly to Minnesota and none were secondary migrants. Table 1 shows additional demographics of participants in this study.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 10)

Demographic Characteristic	*N*	%
Level of English		
None	0	0
Some	3	30
Moderate	2	20
High*	5	50
Total	10	100
Time spent living in Thailand		
Less than 1 year	0	
2–5 years	5	50
5–10 years	2	20
More than 10 years	3	30
Total	10	100
Time in the United States		
Less than 1 year	0	0
2–5 years	2	20
5–10 years	2	20
More than 10 years	6	60
Total	10	100

(continued)

Demographic Characteristic	*N*	%
Table 1, *continued*		
Employment status		
Employed full time	8	80
Employed part time	1	10
Stays home with children	1	10
Total	10	100
Housing status		
Rent an apartment	4	40
Own a home	6	60
Total	10	100

*Participants were considered have a high level of English if they did professional interpreting or if they worked in a setting that required communication in English.

Data Collection

Study Site

This study took place in a St. Paul, MN, a city with one of the largest and most well-organized Karen communities in the United States.

Data Types

Data was collected by individual, semistructured interviews and follow up interviews, an interview with my interpreter/cultural consultant that was recorded and transcribed, and two member check interviews. Data also included notes from casual conversations and other interactions with Karen colleagues and friends during the period of study as well as general observations from my professional and personal interactions

with this community. Lastly, I reviewed one document—the Karen Women's Organization Constitution. This document was in Karen, and I met with my interpreter to provide translation of the major components of the document.

Individual Interviews

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted with Karen women organizers between October 2016 and June 2017. I developed and piloted the initial individual interview protocol with the assistance of my interpreter/cultural consultant (see Appendix D). Because I knew little about Karen women's groups in Minnesota, I started with the classic grounded theory question of "what's happening here?" (Glaser, 1978). I began by asking women how they formed the KCM–WC and why, what they did, what their goals were, etc. In describing what they did, participants discussed their experiences of power, conceptualized primarily as the ability to organize and help Karen people. They also contrasted their experiences of power to help Karen people in Minnesota with their experiences in Burma and Thailand. Following grounded theory methods, I narrowed my interview questions in order to fill out conceptual categories and inform the process of theorizing. As such, later interview questions focused on understanding power and the changes in power and agency that the women described (see Appendix E for example revised interview protocol).

While I developed semistructured interview guidelines, questions were open ended and allowed the interview to follow the stories that participants chose to share. I further explored participants' experiences by asking follow-up questions, including ethnographic exploration questions such as, "Tell me more about that," "can you explain

that further," or "can you give me an example?" I also asked participants to define terms and concepts, rather than assuming I shared the same understanding as them (Charmaz, 2014).

Interviews were 60–90 minutes in length and were conducted at a location that the participant identified as convenient, for example, a private location in their home, place of work, church, or a community organization where I was able to request a private room. I offered to provide an interpreter for the interview to all participants. Five of the interviews were conducted with an interpreter. I conducted follow-up interviews with four participants during the course of the study and member check interviews with two participants. I engaged in multiple conversations with my interpreter/cultural consultant, including one 2-hour long interview that I recorded and transcribed. Interviews with participants continued until I felt I had reached theoretical sufficiency, as previously described.

Use of an Interpreter

Although I have worked with Karen people for 13 years and am familiar with some words in S'gaw Karen language, I do not speak S'gaw Karen. In this study, I utilized a trained, S'gaw Karen interpreter in five of the interviews and conducted five interviews in English. I did not conduct any interviews in Pwo Karen, although some of my participants also spoke this language. S'gaw Karen is the most common language spoken by Karen people in Minnesota, and many Pwo Karen people also speak S'gaw.

I chose my interpreter for this study several reasons. First, I and other health care providers who work with many Karen interpreters have identified her as one of the most

skilled S'gaw Karen interpreters in Minnesota, who has a strong command of both Karen and English languages. Second, she was a professional interpreter working in a setting where she was exposed to social work ethics and confidentiality requirements. Third, I identified her as someone who was humble and gentle and who I perceived would take a "nonthreatening, safe, nonjudgmental and empathic attitude while assuring the interviewee of confidentiality" (Freed, 1988, p. 316). Lastly, I had a previous relationship with her and believed she would give me honest and open feedback.

I provided a 2-hour training to this interpreter prior to initiating the study, which included explanation of the purpose of the study, confidentiality, the consent form, the research process, and my expectations for her roles as an interpreter and cultural consultant during the study (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002). Additionally, I piloted my initial interview questions with her and received her feedback about the best way to ask specific questions. She continued to offer feedback about interview questions and processes throughout the research process. Piloting interview questions with her allowed her to become familiar with the interview questions and how to ask them. I paid her an hourly rate for any time she spent working on this research project.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed in text form and consisted of interview transcripts, memos, and translated parts of the KWO Constitution. Audio recordings were downloaded and kept in digital format on a secure server. Transcripts were also stored on a secure server and signed consent forms were kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. All interviews were transcribed manually by the author within 3 days of completing the interview. Each

interview took up to 6 hours to transcribe. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and nonword utterances were excluded, except where they conveyed additional meaning, for example, laughing when speaking about a serious topic. After each interview, I also wrote reflective memos that included descriptions of the setting, impressions of the interview process and the interview, and emerging ideas I wanted to explore in further interviews. Transcripts were identified by date and participant number. Data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Word. Memos were also typed in Word and stored on a secure server.

The primary method of analysis informing this study was constructivist grounded theory methods (GTM) as outlined by Charmaz (2014). Appendix F presents a visual description of my analysis process. Ethnographic interviewing and data analysis methods were also used to explore culturally grounded terms, concepts, and to situate the analysis in cultural context. After transcribing each interview, I read through the transcription once to get a sense of the content and to check for mistakes. Other GTM techniques I utilized included: initial and focused coding, constant comparative methods, negative case analysis, memo writing, member checking, and using a cultural consultant. I describe each of these in detail below.

Initial Coding

In qualitative research, coding is used to break down large amounts of data text into small segments, which are named, sorted, synthesized, and interrogated for meaning. In GTM, coding is used to identify broader, abstract ideas with theoretical significance, rather than topics or themes, which is common in other types of qualitative coding

(Charmaz, 2014). In other words, from the very beginning of the coding process, the researcher is thinking about emerging theory and potential theoretical significance of different concepts that emerge during data collection.

Following GTM of analysis described by Charmaz (2014), I conducted two phases of coding: initial and focused. Both stages of coding involved reading each interview many times. In GTM, initial and focused coding are not entirely linear phases (Eaves, 2001). I moved back and forth between initial and focused coding throughout data collection and analysis; they wove together and informed each other. During initial coding, I used line-by-line, or sentence-by-sentence, coding. This involved giving a name or code to each line or sentence of the interview (Glaser, 1978). In this phase, the researcher remains "open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities we can discern in the data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 116), which results in an abundance of codes. I used line-by-line coding to immerse myself in the data and to become familiar with what was happening in the data as well as to identify important concepts, which provide the foundation for theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Line-by-line coding was particularly important in the first four interviews as I was getting a sense of the subject and participants' points of views. One of my advisors checked my line-by-line coding for the first 4 interviews. Any differences were discussed and resolved in an in-person meeting. In this stage of coding, I also asked general questions of the data, such as the classic grounded theory question of "what is this data a study of?" (Glaser, 1978, p. 56). I jotted ideas in memos about broader theoretical

categories and relationships between them. For example, I flagged “having no power” as an important concept in the initial coding of my first interview.

In choosing code names, as much as possible, I followed Charmaz’s (2014) suggestion of using gerunds (words that end in *–ing*), which indicate “a language of action rather than of topics and themes,” which are more static and at the analytic level of description (p. 116). This was not always possible during initial coding, which was expected, as Charmaz (2014) also described that is common to have initial codes that are topical and thematic rather than theoretical, because initial codes are numerous and serve multiple purposes (Charmaz, 2014). There were several codes that I changed in the course of the study to emphasize action rather than theme. For example, I updated the code “importance of personal relationships” to “keeping each other close,” which conveyed action and also grounded the code in the words of participants.

Using codes that are close to or “grounded in” the data, including using participants’ own words, generates codes that have relevance and “fit” with the data (Holton, 2007). Codes that maintain participants’ exact words are called *in vivo* codes. *In vivo* codes were useful in this study for two reasons. First, they “anchor” analysis in participants’ descriptions and understanding of their social worlds (Charmaz, 2014, p. 135). In this study, it was especially important to preserve participant’s exact words or phrases when they seemed to have a deeper meaning than their English translation. I also frequently used *in vivo* codes when I did not fully understand the words or phrases used by participants and wanted to explore ethnographically in further interviews. For example, I used the *in vivo* code “looking down on one self” and explored this cultural

phrase in later interviews. In another example, participants talked about being able to "see needs," so I initially used the *in vivo* code "seeing needs." Some *in-vivo* codes were particularly descriptive and were elevated to category or subcategory names, for example, "Knowing Each Other."

GTM emphasizes the use of *constant comparative methods* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This analytic technique involves comparing data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with categories, and categories with categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 25). Data are compared to data within and across interviews. For example, in analyzing my first interview I reused codes, compared data with the same codes to each other, and often refined codes. After completing my second interview, I began to compare and contrast codes between interviews, further revising earlier codes to reflect new insights. In short, in GTM, codes can be developed, changed, and refined at any point in the research process as they are constantly compared to all data and refined based on insights that are gained at any point in the analysis.

In this study, comparing codes developed from later interviews to earlier data sometimes helped me to realize that I had missed the significance of something a participant had shared. For example, when one participant explained the importance of knowing potential leaders, because Karen cultural norms dictated that no one nominated themselves for leadership positions I recognized that an earlier participant had shared the same information. In fact, she stated very clearly, "never nominate yourself!" However, when I first analyzed the earlier participant's interview, I did not understand the deeper cultural dynamic represented in the expression.

Charmaz (2014) described that some coding of codes can be done in initial coding as a strategy to help see the bigger analytic picture. After coding three interviews, I met with my advisor for help with making sense of the plethora of line-by-line codes I had generated. I chose 42 initial codes that were relevant to my study topic. Together, we sorted and coded them and came up with six broader categories. The purpose was not to apply these codes as focused codes, but to help me to step back from being immersed in the data and understand the broader concepts that the women were talking about.

Focused Coding

The second phase of coding consisted of focused coding. The process of focused coding included reviewing each interview multiple times, examining initial codes, sorting them, and comparing them to identify focused codes (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes included initial codes that were used more frequently, had theoretical significance, explained multiple other codes, or were significant in some other way for explaining the actions or processes described by participants.

Focused codes represent tentative decisions in the conceptualization of categories and the development of theory (Charmaz, 2014). As I read through my codes and data numerous times, I memoed about focused codes as they developed and the emerging theory. I also constantly considered how focused codes and emerging theoretical ideas fit with my data, revising them as necessary. As focused codes are developed, they allow the researcher to more quickly conceptualize large amounts of data through defined focused codes (Charmaz, 2014).

After reviewing the transcripts and all initial codes and memos from the first four interviews, the seeds of an emerging theory began to emerge. When I asked women to tell me about their organizing work in MN, they responded with phrases like “here we don’t do too much.” All four participants said they felt like they had “no power” and that Karen women were “less active” and “less engaged” in organizing in the United States compared to Burma and Thailand. I was struck when one participant, who was well known for her leadership roles in Karen women’s organizations, told me that she was not involved in organizing in Minnesota, and did not think she could organize women here.

As participants talked about being less active, it made me wonder why they were less active. I also wondered what they meant by “power” and why they felt like they had less power in the United States than in Burma or Thailand, where they were persecuted and where they had few civil and human rights than in the United States. I initially conceptualized the emerging theory as a theory of “less active,” and later modified it to be more broadly about power and agency. I began to focus data collection and analysis on understanding power, what it meant, and participants’ experiences of power in Burma, Thailand, and Minnesota. As I continued my analysis, I also interrogated the meaning of previous codes in relationship to power.

Data analysis continued even through the writing of the findings section, as I continued to think about all of my data, the codes and categories I was working with, and how they were related to each other and the core category of power. When I settled on the final five categories to include in my findings, I went through one more stage of coding where I reviewed all interview transcripts one more time and recoded for the final

categories. This final stage of coding also helped me to organize the subcategories and components of each category.

Memos

Memoing is used in GTM for several purposes, for example, to analyze ideas about data and codes, to document the research process, and to document researcher reflexivity. Lempert (2007) described, "[Memos] ask questions of the data: what is this an example of? When does it happen? Where is it happening? With whom? How? Under what conditions does it seem to occur? With what consequences?" (p. 251). Memos link the data to the emerging theory and explain how and why the theory was developed from the data (Lempert, 2007). In this study, I kept several types of memos, including memos about specific codes and concepts, linking memos that described how codes and concepts were related to each other, methodological memos that documented methodological decisions made during the course of the study, and summary memos that documented a summary of my work each day or thoughts and impressions after each interview, including highlighting new data and connections to data previously collected. As the research progressed, memos became increasingly theoretical and abstract, as did the focus of ongoing data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). I also wrote theoretical memos to describe my understanding of the emerging theory, which sometimes included "free writes" that were useful for fleshing out ideas as they were beginning to form.

While attempting to remain open to whatever was emerging from the data, I also acknowledged that my previous knowledge, understanding, and experiences shaped the way I understood the data (Charmaz, 2014). I used reflexivity memos to capture my

awareness of the ways my past experiences and my perspectives influenced my understanding and analysis. For example, prior to starting the study, I memoed about my previous experiences with the KWO in Thailand and the KCM–WC in Minnesota and the preconceptions I had about Karen women from those experiences. Lastly, I also used memos to create outlines and diagrams to organize concepts, categories, and relationships.

Ethical Considerations

Numerous problems are introduced when the researcher and participants do not share a common language (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002). Scholars have pointed out the important role that language plays in organizing and understanding the social world and meaning (Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1979). There are many challenges associated with transmitting meaning and the cultural assumptions embedded in language across languages through the use of an interpreter. According to Freed (1988), the following must be considered when utilizing an interpreter during a qualitative interview: the interpreter's role, confidentiality considerations, dynamics between the parties involved with the interview, cultural factors, and the type of person best suited to interpret (p. 316). Prior to conducting interviews, I provided information and training to my interpreter, as previously described.

I also took other factors into consideration when considering the trustworthiness of this research using an interpreter. First, all participants had some English. In fact, I had previously communicated exclusively in English with two participants who communicated through an interpreter for this research. They appeared to closely follow

the interpretations during each interview, and each made one correction or clarification of the interpretation during the course of the interview. One participants clarified the meaning of a word that was difficult to translate (she described that what she meant by "jail" in Burma was a simple restraint of someone's legs in a bamboo structure). The second participant pointed out that the interpreter forgot to include one detail of her response. These examples highlighted participant's attention to the interpretation of their responses and willingness to make corrections as needed.

Second, I compared the findings from interpreted and noninterpreted interviews and found no significant patterns in responses (Twinn, 1997). I also compared findings from participants with whom I had a previous relationship and participants with whom I had no previous relationship and found no significant patterns in responses. Third, I asked my interpreter to relisten to the first two interviews and make corrections or additions to the transcription anywhere she felt her interpretation was incorrect or missing. She did not report any incorrect interpretations but did report some additions. After this, I revised my interview style to ask participants to speak in even shorter segments before pausing for interpretation. Fourth, on several occasions, I replayed a segment for my interpreter and asked her to reinterpret the participant's response as well as to describe specific cultural terms or phrases. Although my intention was to obtain a better understanding of participants' responses, this also allowed me to check for consistency and reliability in her interpretation of participant's responses. Lastly, I was able to draw on my experience working with Karen people and familiarity with the culture and language (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002).

Finally, because this research was conducted with vulnerable participants who had a history of trauma, special attention was paid to addressing issues of privacy and confidentiality and to ensuring noncoercion and informed consent. Consent forms were explained in detail, participants were given opportunities to ask questions, participants were given an option to give verbal rather than written consent, and participants were given copies of the consent form in both English and Karen.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative methods and cross-cultural research contain certain limitations related to trustworthiness. Not being fluent in Karen language presented a challenge described by Spradley (1979) as a lack of *translational competence* (p. 20). To capture complexity and respond to limitations and threats to trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry, I utilized systematic checks from qualitative, grounded theory, and ethnographic methodologies and built these checks into the data collection and analysis. They included: member checking, triangulation of data, negative case analysis, prolonged engagement, use of cultural consultants, peer debriefing, thick description, audit trail, and reflexivity.

Member Checking

Member checking involves going back to the participants of a study, presenting them with the study findings or a portion of the findings, and getting their feedback on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and how well they reflect their views and experiences. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). I conducted member checking on multiple levels, including checking my comprehension of participants' responses, codes,

and emerging and final categories and theory with participants and asking for their feedback.

In a grounded theory study, member checking is also built in to the research process, as the interviewer uses the constant comparative method to collect and compare data about the emerging codes and categories of the emerging theory until theoretical sufficiency is reached. In grounded theories, interview questions become more focused on understanding theoretically important concepts and relationships that are emerging from the interview data. In other words, I constantly checked my understanding of the emerging theory and important concepts and categories in ongoing interviews with participants.

In addition to comparing data across participants, I also conducted follow up interviews when I had clarification questions about something a participant had shared, to obtain more information related to the developing theory, or to get a participant's perspective about something another participant had shared, consistent with constant comparative methods. I also frequently met with my interpreter/cultural consultant to get feedback on three levels: about my understanding of interview transcripts, the fit of my codes and categories with the data, and my emerging and final theory. I asked her for clarification and additional examples of terms, phrases, and concepts, including those that were culturally based.

I conducted formal member check interviews with two participants from my study. The purpose of these member check interviews was to present the major categories of my theory for their feedback. After conducting six interviews, I conducted my first

member check interview. I chose this participant because I have strong rapport with her and felt she would provide honest and open feedback. The purpose of this meeting was to check the accuracy of my developing theory and get a sense of anything significant that was missing, which could be pursued in my next interviews. In this interview, I summarized my preliminary theory, the major categories, and my interpretation of important cultural concepts. I asked her to critically analyze my interpretations and respond to them. She stated that she agreed with the major components of the theory that I presented to her. To further assess agreement beyond simple confirmation, I also asked her to provide additional examples or to repeat her understanding of what I said back to me. I analyzed this interview and noted ways that her examples and responses affirmed, conflicted with, or added to the emerging theory and important concepts, and crafted future interview protocol based on these insights. Overall, her responses generally added to and did not majorly conflict with my emerging theory.

Upon completing my analysis, I conducted a second member check interview with a participant who had significant experience working with the KWO in Burma and Thailand but was not active with Karen women's groups in Minnesota (see Appendix H for this member check interview protocol). I chose this participant because I wanted to see if my theory captured her experience of loss of power and agency to organize and help her community in the context of resettlement. I presented the major categories to her and she expressed strong agreement with my analysis. Her responses added additional examples, some of which I incorporated into my findings section. The additions that she suggested were already captured by other categories in the theory. For example, in

discussing the category of knowledge, she wanted to add that women also needed time to be able to organize and help each other. Time as a resource for being able to organize and help each other was already captured in Category 5.

Triangulation of Data

To capture complexity and increase the trustworthiness of my findings, I triangulated multiple data sources, including interviews with participants and cultural consultants, member check interviews, existing literature, and organizational documents (the KWO Constitution) (Creswell, 2013). The emergent nature of qualitative methods and constant comparative methods of grounded theory analysis allowed ongoing negotiation and refinement of meanings and interpretations with Karen participants throughout the study (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Negative Case Analysis

Throughout the analysis process, data that did not "fit" with other codes were explored in greater depth. I also used sampling to identify potential negative cases. For example, when the majority of participants expressed that they did not feel like they had power to respond to *family problems,* I identified a woman leader who was active in helping with *family problems* to see if she had different understandings or experiences of power. Additionally, because most participants expressed feeling like they did not have adequate knowledge of U.S. systems, I identified a Karen woman leader who was knowledgeable about domestic violence resources in the United States.

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement involves spending long periods of time in the field. Through prolonged engagement, researchers build trust and rapport and become familiar

with the setting. Building relationships and making observations over a long period of time also gives researchers a better understanding of the complexity of a setting and exposes them to a plurality of perspectives (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This study took place over the course of more than 1 year. However, my work with the Karen community in Minnesota has spanned over 13 years and many different personal and professional settings. Over the course of this study, I conducted multiple interviews, but also had many opportunities to engage in informal conversations with Karen colleagues and friends to check out my analysis and thoughts regarding the emerging theory.

Use of Cultural Consultants

During this study, I utilized three cultural consultants, including my interpreter, who I refer to as my interpreter/cultural consultant in this paper. Cultural consultants helped me develop the initial list of key informants for this study, provided consultation on culturally appropriate recruitment strategies and interview questions and etiquette, and provided consultation about cultural concepts and context. I also piloted my initial interview guide with my interpreter/cultural consultant. She helped me revise my questions to make most sense to participants. I debriefed with her after each interpreted interview to get her feedback about the process, her impressions of participants' comprehension of questions, what was most striking or significant about the interview from her perspective, and anything else she felt was notable. I also adjusted the pacing of interpretation during interviews based on her feedback.

While I was coding interviews, I marked words or sections of interviews whose exact meanings were unclear to me. I then met with my interpreter/cultural consultant and

we listened to the audio recordings together. She offered further explanation of the Karen translation. For example, I asked her to clarify her use of the word “controlling” in the following sentence: “the upper people are still helping us and controlling us.” I described how I understood the word “controlling” and she explained that the Karen word the participant used had a meaning closer to “support” or “guidance.” I also met with her after individual interviews were complete and presented the final components of my theory for her feedback, corrections, and additions.

I also took advantage of the fact that I work with Karen colleagues, and I frequently engaged in conversations with them to better understand cultural phenomenon that were coming up in my research when they also came up during the course of our work. There were many overlaps between issues that came up in my study and my work, for example, on topics such as Karen community organizing and *family problems.* I also met several times with my interpreter/cultural consultant during the data collection and analysis stages to get assistance with interpretation and understanding of findings.

Peer Debriefing

Because it was not feasible to have multiple coders in this study, there was a chance that my interpretations could have biased the analysis. To increase the credibility of the study, I consulted with one of my advisors, Dr. Patricia Shannon, as a peer reviewer throughout the study. After each of the first four interviews that I conducted, she checked my line-by-line coding, and we met in person to discuss and resolve any differences. After I completed three interviews, we also met to categorize and code 42 initial codes, which we chosen for theoretical significance, into 6 broader categories. This

exercise helped me to step back from the data and understand the broader concepts that were emerging in the data. I continued to meet regularly with this advisor throughout the study.

Thick Description

Thick description are important in constructivist studies for contextualizing study findings within their cultural context (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Conveying findings using thick description also enables readers to make their own assessment of the data analysis and to gauge applicability of findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this dissertation, I utilized thick description to explain each of the major categories and subcategories that comprised my theory.

Audit Trail

Finally, I maintained an audit trail and documented all steps of the research process and how design and analysis decisions were made in a research journal that contained over 100 pages of memos, including methodological memos. This document provides an audit trail that an external auditor could follow (Creswell, 2014). I also met frequently with my advisors throughout the research process and discussed design decisions, data analysis, theory development, and the presentation of findings. These processes improved the rigor of the design, fidelity to that design, and accuracy of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity and Bias

Because of the instrumental role of the researcher in qualitative research, there is a risk of bias in all qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, in grounded theory studies, preconceptions and biases are to be acknowledged and

interrogated in relation to data (Dey, 2007). While my previous experience working with Karen women in Minnesota has privileged me to certain knowledge related to my study topic, it has also given me preconceptions and biases that could threaten the trustworthiness of my interpretations and findings. I managed this risk through reflexivity, as well as through triangulation of data, and member checking.

Prior to initiating the study and throughout the research process I engaged in reflexivity about my own beliefs, values, preconceptions, and power dynamics in the research and interview process. After I decided on the topic for dissertation, I engaged in reflexive memoing about my motivations for engaging in this research and what I expected to find. Second, I wrote reflexive memos throughout the coding and analysis process, particularly when concepts emerged that were closely related to my practice or personal experiences. In writing reflexive memos, I documented previous experiences and ideas that were related to the concepts emerging during the study and how and from what sources those impressions were formed (professional training, other experiences with Karen people). For example, when participants talked about family violence, I memoed about my beliefs and values regarding family violence and paid attention to how they impacted my ability to understand the perspectives of participants.

Lastly, I worked to recognize my use of professional language in the coding process. For example, I recognized that I was using the code “empowerment,” which is a central concept in social work practice. I reread my data coded to this term to interrogate its fit with this category and ultimately decided to use participants’ words for initial coding rather than fitting them into an extant concept. Engaging in constant comparison

was another tool that helped me check whether my coding reflected the experiences participants described or my own ideas.

Chapter 4

Findings

Chapter Overview

The findings presented here are based on the experiences of 10 Karen women who came to the United States as refugees and were involved with women's organizations in the United States, Thailand, and Burma. Seven were currently or recently involved with the KCM Women's Committee (KCM–WC), and all participants had experience in Karen women's committees in churches and/or with the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) in Burma and Thailand. Findings focus on women's experiences of what they described as "power," conceptualized in this study as agency and capacity to help their community. Four categories emerged that explained women's ability to organize to help each other in the context of resettlement: (re-)establishing a self-help structure, personal and premigration relationships or *Knowing Each Other,* having resources (including knowledge, time, transportation, and financial resources), and having authority. In this chapter, I begin with a definition of power as conceptualized by participants, followed by an introduction of the preliminary grounded theory that developed from this analysis. In the body of this chapter, I further develop and support this theory based on analysis of participants' experiences.

Description of Grounded Theory

Initial interviews revealed that the main goal of KCM–WC was to enhance women's ability help Karen women and families in resettlement. The motivation to help each other was based on a shared history of oppression, a common identity as a

persecuted group, and shared experiences of resettlement challenges. These sentiments are captured in the following quotes:

> We thought that we might have a lot of people coming [to Minnesota]. We sponsored them because we needed our people to start a new life, because our people were staying in the jungle or in the refugee camp and there was no hope for their life (P4).

> When we first came . . . we really strongly wanted to help our people . . . We tried to find a way to help them because we had similar experiences. We went through the war, the torture, the attacks, so we had the feeling that they needed our help" (P7).

Participants used the word "power" (*tah hsu ta k'mo*) in reference to their ability to help their community. Power in this dissertation was thus conceptualized as *agency*, or the *capacity* to help their community, which is similar to feminist conceptualizations of *power as capacity* (Lloyd, 2013). To illustrate, one participant explained,

> If I have the power, as a woman, I will be able to help people that really need help. We will be able to help women without hesitating or being afraid to speak up about the abuse. We will be able to connect women to women's shelters. Woman will be able to help each other solve the problems (P8).

Having power was associated with having autonomy and agency, while not having power was associated with feeling "stuck," implying immobility and inability to act, or a lack of agency. For example, "If I have power, I can do what I want. I don't have to be afraid. I don't have to ask for permission. I can help them . . . I don't have to feel stuck or afraid before doing something" (P2). In initial interviews, participants primarily focused on their loss of power to help their community since resettling to the United States. Later interviews and analysis revealed more nuanced conceptualizations of power.

The model, grounded in the findings of the present study, places 'Power to Engage in Self-Help' at the center. The specific foci of self-help efforts in resettlement

were flexible and responsive to emerging community needs. For example, when the Karen community first arrived in Minnesota, their self-help efforts focused on filling gaps in the resettlement system and meeting immediate resettlement needs, such as providing orientation to life in the United States, housing, employment, assistance with applying for public assistance, interpreting on a volunteer basis, and collecting and distributing basic needs items such as clothing and food. Over the past 10 years, as some U.S. systems have become more adept at serving this community, for example by hiring Karen staff or utilizing professional interpreters, Karen leaders have shifted the focus of their self-help efforts to responding to *family problems*. At the time of this study, participants felt that few existing U.S. systems adequately addressed these problems. The term *family problems* referred to interconnected challenges Karen families experienced that included intimate partner violence, child abuse, parenting challenges, and substance use, which were also related to resettlement challenges and stressors.

Four categories were identified in this study to explain women's agency and capacity to help their community in resettlement. While they are depicted in the model, and to some extent in this paper, as discrete ideal types, in reality they more closely interrelated and overlapping themes and are thus depicted using a Venn diagram (Figure 2). Below, I describe each of these categories in turn.

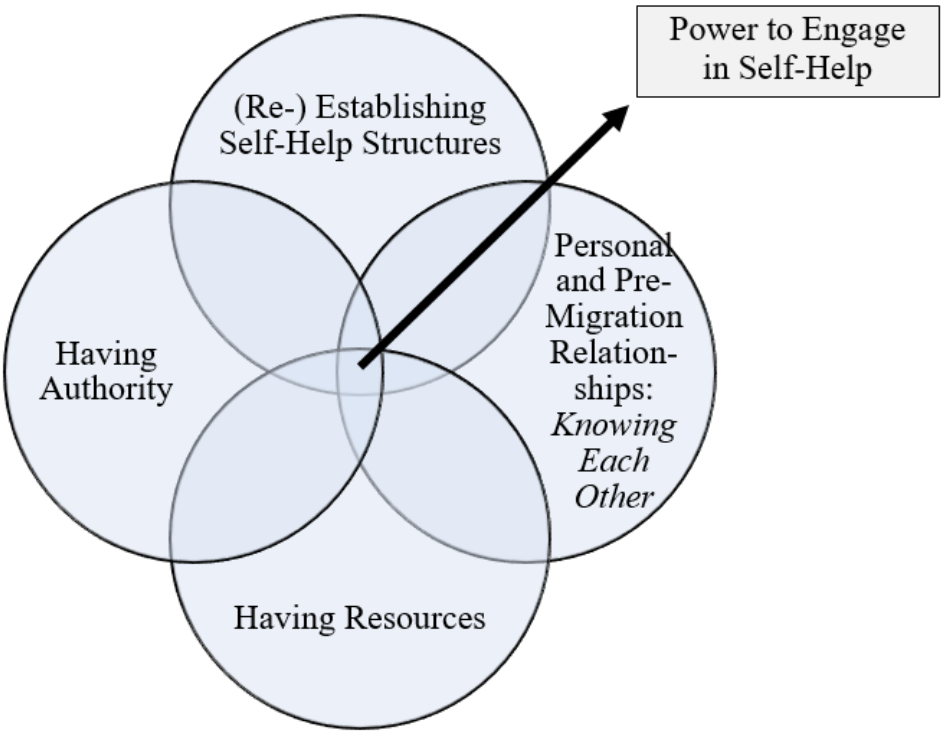

Figure 2. Grounded theory of Karen women's power to engage in self-help in resettlement.

The first category is *(Re-)Establishing a Self-Help Structure*. Karen people have historically utilized highly organized, hierarchical community structures of self-governance to promote self-help and mutual aid in settings where governmental authorities failed to support their basic needs (Henry, 2011). (Re-)establishing a community organizational structure in resettlement was one of the first actions taken by Karen leaders when they arrived in Minnesota specifically for the purpose of organizing self-help efforts.

The second category is *Personal and Premigration Relationships: "Knowing Each Other."* This category explained how having personal relationships with others in their Karen community, especially premigration relationships, was related to cultural

norms of help-seeking and help-giving and how personal relationships enabled leaders to be able to identify and respond to community members' needs. This category also explained how intracommunity relationships were important for nominating volunteer community leaders who could provide and organize community self-help efforts.

The third category was *Having Resources*, which included subcategories: *Knowledge*, *Time*, *Transportation*, and *Financial Resources.* Knowledge about self-governance structures used in Burma and Thailand was needed to be able to (re-)establish these structures in resettlement. Knowledge about existing U.S. systems and services or what participants referred to as *Knowing the System Here* was also needed to help Karen people with resettlement needs and family problems. Knowledge was also related to self-efficacy or women's perceptions of their ability to be helpful to their community. Other resources that impacted women's capacity for self-help included having time to organize and help each other, having access to transportation and being able to gather and help each other, and financial resources.

The final category was *Having Authority*. Loss of two types of authority primarily affected women's ability to help each other in resettlement. Loss of *rational–legal authority*, or the authority to make and enforce legal rules debilitated community leaders' ability to intervene to solve family problems. This type of authority was lost when they resettled and became part of U.S. political and sociocultural systems, and participants struggled to connect to U.S. legal authorities to regain access to this type of power. Loss of *traditional authority* or authority based on cultural norms and traditions also weakened

the relational power and influence of faith and community leaders to intervene in family problems.

These categories are represented in the simple visual depiction of the theory presented in Figure 2. In general, the presence of these categories enhanced women's power to engage in self-help, while their absence presented barriers to women being able to help each other. Categories are represented by dotted lines to represent that they were compromised by the process of resettling to the United States. In the remainder of this chapter, I present the major categories in the order that they emerged in the analysis to explain women's experiences of power to help each other in resettlement. While presented as discrete categories, the overlaps and interrelated relationships between categories are also described and depicted in increasingly complex visual depictions of the model throughout this chapter. Unfortunately, visual depictions of the model throughout the rest of this chapter present the categories as even more discrete, as using a Venn diagram proved too cumbersome to depict these relationships.

Category 1: (Re-)Establishing a Self-Help Structure

When the first Karen families arrived in the United States, they almost immediately (re-)formed a familiar self-help structure to provide basic resettlement services to their community and to fill gaps in resettlement services. The Karen Community of Minnesota (KCM), which included a permanent women's committee (KCM–WC), was founded in 2004 by the first Karen leaders to arrive in Minnesota. According to one participant, the association was formed when there were only approximately 20 Karen families in St. Paul (P4). The KCM structure represented an

adaptation of community-based self-help systems they used in Burma and Thailand. Although no participant was certain of the ultimate source of the KCM organizational model, it was described as a replica of the KNU organizational structure, which Karen leaders learned from the British during the colonial period (P4). Another participant described it as similar to the village structure of utilizing a village headman (P3), which was a patriarchal model that has been described in the literature as strongly influenced by Baptist missionaries (Taylor, 2009).

In this section, I describe the impetus for (re-)forming a self-help structure in St. Paul, which was to organize self-help efforts to meet resettlement and other community needs. First, I give a brief overview of the KCM and KCM–WC structure and explain how it was an adaptation of Karen self-help systems in Burma and Thailand. Second, I explain how establishing this structure made it possible to mobilize a high degree of willingness to help one another, in other words, for mobilizing this community's bonding capital. Specifically, establishing an organizational structure provided mechanisms for electing leaders, distributing and delegating responsibilities for providing resettlement services, and coordinating volunteers. It also provided a structure for collectively identifying community needs and collective problem solving. Lastly, establishing a community association gave community leaders credibility and responsibility to build networks to broader U.S. systems as representatives of their community, which resulted in additional resources for the whole community.

Impetus for (Re-)Establishing a Self-Help Structure in Resettlement

Karen leaders (re-)formed a familiar community self-help structure to fulfill a number of social, economic, cultural, and political needs. The initial focus was on meeting the unaddressed resettlement needs of new Karen families. These needs were unmet by mainstream systems because they were wholly unprepared to serve this new population when they first arrived. The following quotes illustrate how unprepared U.S. systems were to serve Karen families when they began arriving in the United States, and how a lack of adequate services prompted leaders to turn to self-help systems to provide basic resettlement services to their community: "[When Karen people first arrived to Minnesota] no one knew anything about Karen people" (P6), "[The first Karen families] had to do everything on their own. They went through poverty . . . so when we came, they helped us their selves" (P10). Another participant recalled that initially, no resettlement, health, or social service agencies had Karen staff or interpreters, and that her family had to communicate through "body language" with resettlement agency staff when they arrived: "we tried to talk to them. Sometimes they understood; sometimes they didn't. We just had to use our body language . . . a lot of American people tried to help us, but we didn't understand each other, because we did not have interpreters" (P4).

Women and other community leaders filled in system gaps by providing resettlement services in practically every area of resettlement, including airport pickup of new families, interpreting, transportation, finding housing, applying for public assistance and social security cards, school registration, employment, providing for basic needs, orientation, and other areas. The list of services KCM and KCM–WC initially provided

closely resembled the core services that resettlement agencies are funded by the federal government to provide (World Relief Durham, n.d.). By establishing KCM and KCM–WC, Karen leaders essentially established a parallel resettlement system that performed or assisted with, on a volunteer and community-funded basis, the responsibilities of resettlement agencies who were not adequately equipped or prepared to serve this population. This finding is consistent with other research with Karen people and other pioneer-background communities that has found that existing systems were unprepared to serve these groups upon their arrival (Haines et al., 1981; Harkins, 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Lewis, 2010; McPherson, 2010; Smith, 2013; Swe & Ross, 2010).

Basic Structure of the Karen Community of Minnesota and Women's Committee

The basic structure of KCM and KCM–WC was flexible and originally designed to focus on basic resettlement services. The first step in establishing the organization was to create a founding document that one participant referred to as "the constitution" or "Karen community policies" (P7). This document defined the leadership positions and roles, committees, election and membership procedures, and other organizational features. All leadership positions were chosen through democratic election, as established in the "constitution." Leadership positions had term limits with elections held every 2 years (P4). All positions within the organization were volunteer. Members paid annual dues of $1 per month to support the association and for the benefit of receiving services (P4). Financial resources were used to pay for community events, such as the Karen New Year, or to purchase basic needs items for new Karen families (P4). A revolving loan

fund was also established to help families with financial needs, such as paying a housing deposit, or in crisis situations (P4).

The structure of the association featured a central executive committee with "upper leaders" (P2) who provided oversight and overall guidance to the association and its committees. In addition, there were two main, permanent committees, the women's committee and the youth[11] committee, which each had their own central executive committees (P2). The KCM organizational structure, included as Appendix H, was similar to the KNU model and the organizational models they used in the refugee camps, examples of which are included in Appendix A. Although the women's committee was composed exclusively of women, women were not limited to roles in this committee.

While the women's and youth committees were identified as "the big two committees that do a lot," other committees were also created and disbanded "as needed" (P2). At the time of study, other committees included culture, social, education, and news and documentation. An example of a committee that was disbanded was the transportation committee, which originally focused on organizing volunteers to provide transportation new arrivals to attend various resettlement appointments. While the organizational structure was hierarchical, each committee had autonomy to execute their responsibilities. The purpose of creating committees was to provide leadership and delegate different responsibilities for helping the community, as explained by one participant:

> We created committees because we could share our work . . . If we just created one big group, nothing would be finished . . . By creating

[11] Culturally, Karen define *youth* as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35.

> committees, the women will do the women's part that women can do, and the leaders can just lead us and just tell us what we need to do (P4).

The central executive, women, and youth committees each also had subcommittees that represented different geographic areas in St. Paul where Karen people were concentrated. KCM leaders identified areas of St. Paul where large numbers of Karen people lived. For example, an area could include several blocks in a neighborhood or a large apartment complex. One subcommittee represented Karen people who owned houses. People from these geographic areas elected their own representatives, referred to as "area leaders" or "group leaders." Area leaders were responsible for providing services to Karen people in their area and for representing the needs of their area to the broader association. At the time of study, there were five geographic subcommittees. The process of creating geographic areas with area leaders in St. Paul resembled the creation of zones and sections and zone and section leaders in the refugee camps (cultural consultant).

Having area leaders facilitated collaboration and capacity to help Karen families. Area leaders recruited women from their area to make up their "team" of volunteers who were willing to help families in their area: "we found a head leader in each area and then the head leader found their team workers. That's how we recruited" (P3). When families were identified as needing assistance in that area, they could be referred to their area leaders, for example, "I look at their situation, the type of need they have. If it's not urgent, I call their group leaders [to help them]" (P3). This participant also connected new families to their area leaders by telling them: "We have group leaders [in your area], so if you need something, call here" (P3).

Area leaders also worked together to help newly arriving Karen families in different groups. Below is a quote that illustrates how the central executive committee coordinated help for new families using their geographic subcommittee structures:

> This is how we did it: we had 5 [area] groups, each with a team. For example, two new arrival families came. So we gave the duty to take care of the food, shelter, and other stuff to two groups. They gathered food to donate for the new family. We told the other 3 groups to just hold on, and when the next family came, the other groups took responsibility for them. And if an emergency situation came up, we also had extra donations, like oil, salt, rice, and other stuff that was separate for emergency situations. When we didn't have time to go and ask around [for donations] we could use that (P2).

In short, establishing a self-help association directly enhanced the community's capacity to help one another by providing a structure through which they could divide and delegate responsibilities for responding to the basic needs of community members. It also facilitated collective identification of community needs and collective problem solving. For example, one participant said: "We can't do everything ourselves, as a women's organization. We also have an upper committee. Before making some decision, we have to set up a meeting and conference to all the committees instead of doing everything ourselves" and "I would like to gather a meeting with all my women's groups, all the teams, to talk about how to solve the problem with the husband and wife and how to help them" (P2). Relatedly, this participant answered an interview question about whether she wanted the women's committee to collaborate more with existing U.S. systems by stating, "For this question, I can't answer it right away. Before making an answer, I have to talk to all the committees and see what ideas they have, and we have to think about it together" (P2).

Lastly, establishing a community association created a source of help that Karen people could recognize and where they could receive assistance when mainstream resettlement services were unprepared to assist them. It became even more important to have an identifiable community association where people could get help as the community grew in size and diversity, which is discussed further in Category 2. They are also identifiable by mainstream organizations and thereby facilitate the development of bridging and linking ties, discussed later in this category.

Actualizing Bonding Capital through a Self-Help Structure: "Karen Help Karen"

(Re-)establishing a self-help structure provided a mechanism for mobilizing a deep sense of communal responsibility to help each other, captured in banner displayed in KCM office that read: "Karen help Karen." This orientation toward mutual assistance was forged through generations of persecution and utilizing self-help structures to meet community needs as well as collectivist social orientation (Barron, 2004; Cusano, 2001; Henry, 2011; Scott, 2009). As described above, Karen leaders established a process for electing leaders who could provide assistance and coordinate volunteers to help their community. The following statements exemplify the collective nature of Karen society, their willingness to help one another, and how this sentiment supported self-help efforts:

> No one asked us to [help each other]. We see it. We feel it. So if someone needs help, we've been in that situation once too. So if our own people have to face [resettlement challenges], we are the same people, so we had to face the same thing. So that's how [we started]. We started to see [those challenges] and we started to organize (P2).

> [Women volunteer because] we thought that this is what the community needs. And I think women have a big heart. They love their community. And they just want to see their people growing up. So, I think a lot of woman that want to volunteer are like that. . . . Even though we don't get

> paid . . . but we don't mind. We just want to see that a Karen person gets paid. So if they get paid money, it's just like we get paid too. We want everybody to see that Karen people try so hard. They can stand by their selves. So we just support them (P4).

> They are our family too. We try to keep them and treat them as family . . . Even though they are not my blood family, I still treat them the same as my family. (P8).

> Everything we did was volunteer. We went to work and when we got off work, we volunteered. Somebody who was working in the evening helped in the morning. My husband and I were working in the morning, so in the evening we helped families, like with a lot of paperwork (P4).

> I worked the night shift and had three kids. When I came home from work, I could not think about going back to bed, because the new families had language barriers and they didn't have a car . . . And when new families came, they could not help anyone either. They did not know anything yet . . . [so we had to help them] (P6).

> It was hard for us, because we had a lot of families coming, and then sometimes they didn't have food and they didn't get food stamps right away. So our women's department, we collected rice and oil and other food. The people that had lived in the U.S. longer, we donated these things. And then if someone else didn't have food stamps, but we had food stamps, we would buy the rice for them with our food stamps. So we couldn't donate money because we didn't have money. But some people were working, so they donated money, like $20 or $30. Some people donated money and we collected it and we supported new families when they arrived (P4).

The value of intragroup relational networks (further described in the next category) for meeting needs is referred to in the social capital literature as bonding capital, which derives from bonding ties or relationships. This study's findings support Woolcock's (2001) description of bonding ties as protectionist in nature, providing a safety net for meeting basic needs. Participants' responses also indicated a high level of social cohesion, intragroup trust, and willingness to volunteer to help fellow community members, in other words, they indicated strong potential bonding capital as defined by

Coleman (1998) and Putnam (1995, 2000). This willingness to volunteer to help one another was based on a shared history of oppression, common identity as a persecuted group, and shared experiences of resettlement challenges.

However, researchers have cautioned against conflating the existence of relational networks or social cohesiveness of a community—the potential capacity of social capital (access or availability of resources in the network)—with its actual use (mobilization or use to achieve an outcome) (Lin, 2008). For example, in her research on the preservation of social capital by Somali Bantu refugees across settings of displacement and resettlement, Smith (2013) identified strong potential bonding capital as well as several environmental factors that inhibited this community's ability to utilize historical, communal support systems.

So far, findings have described high potential bonding capital of this group as well as the intended use of this capital, which was self-help. While most extant literature on social capital looks at the capacity or mobilization of social capital for predefined economic or integration outcomes, this study contributes knowledge about the mobilization of social capital resources to achieve community-identified outcomes of assisting each other with resettlement needs and family problems. Lastly, this category introduced (re-)forming a community association as one strategy used by Karen women to mobilize the potential bonding capital in their community networks for actual use. Additional categories describe other factors that supported or inhibited actualization of bonding capital.

Mobilizing Bridging and Linking Capital through a Self-Help Structure

Having a community association with elected leaders also facilitated the development of relationships with broader U.S. communities and systems, in other words, bridging and linking ties. Karen leaders acting as representatives of the community association played important roles in building relationships with external actors on behalf of the whole community[12], which resulted in increased resources for community members, such as the availability of more culturally relevant services. One participant described the educational and advocacy roles of association leaders in the early resettlement period of this community: "we wanted [the United States] to know that we had gone through trauma and torture," and "we wanted American people to know that we had our Karen women's group. We want all the world to know that we have the support to help Karen people [the community association]" (P7). Another participant described how Karen leaders educated U.S. systems and advocated for system changes to better serve Karen people:

> The KCM leaders were working together, and they tried to tell the government about the needs of Karen people. When they went to the doctor appointment, they tried to tell the doctor that the Karen people need an interpreter. They said 'you don't have the interpreter line yet, so you better provide the interpreter.' And in schools and in the police department they also spread the word about the needs of Karen people . . . (P10).

[12] Within refugee studies, the representativeness of leaders who speak on behalf of other community members has been described as problematic, particularly when outsiders look for or identify such representatives (Piacentini, 2012). In this study, the granting of representational rights came from the community.

One specific Karen leader was named by several participants who “spread the word about Karen people” (P3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10). This included outreach and education to U.S. churches that promoted building of partnerships for cosponsoring new Karen families.

This finding supports the notion that a complex relationship exists between bridging and bonding capital. Community leaders can play “broker” or “bridge-builder” roles in connecting to the broader society and institutions, which result in resources for the whole community (Bailie, 2010; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Granovetter, 1983; Lacroix et al., 2015; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). For example, Elliott and Yusuf (2014) also found that the early wave of Somali community leaders to New Zealand represented other community members to government and NGO representatives, obtaining resettlement resources and giving community members a broader voice. The findings of this dissertation study support the view that bonding and bridging capital can be related and overlapping. Karen leaders acting as representatives of the community association played important roles in building bridging ties, which benefited the whole community, supporting findings that ethnic associations are especially valuable for new communities to access resources in the resettlement setting (Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Furthermore, refugee associations are also identifiable by mainstream systems and services that want to build bridging and linking ties to new communities.

Figure 3 depicts the multiple pathways through which having a self-help structure enhanced agency and capacity for mutual self-help. First, it provided a structure for electing community leaders, recruiting volunteers, and organizing self-help efforts. Second, having a community association facilitated election of leaders who could build

bridging and linking ties that resulted in resources that benefitted the whole community. Third, the relationship between intracommunity relationships and (re-)establishing a self-help structure is bidirectional, as having a community association provided a structure for mobilizing and organizing potential bonding capital and also facilitated building intracommunity relationships, for example, through outreach by area leaders.

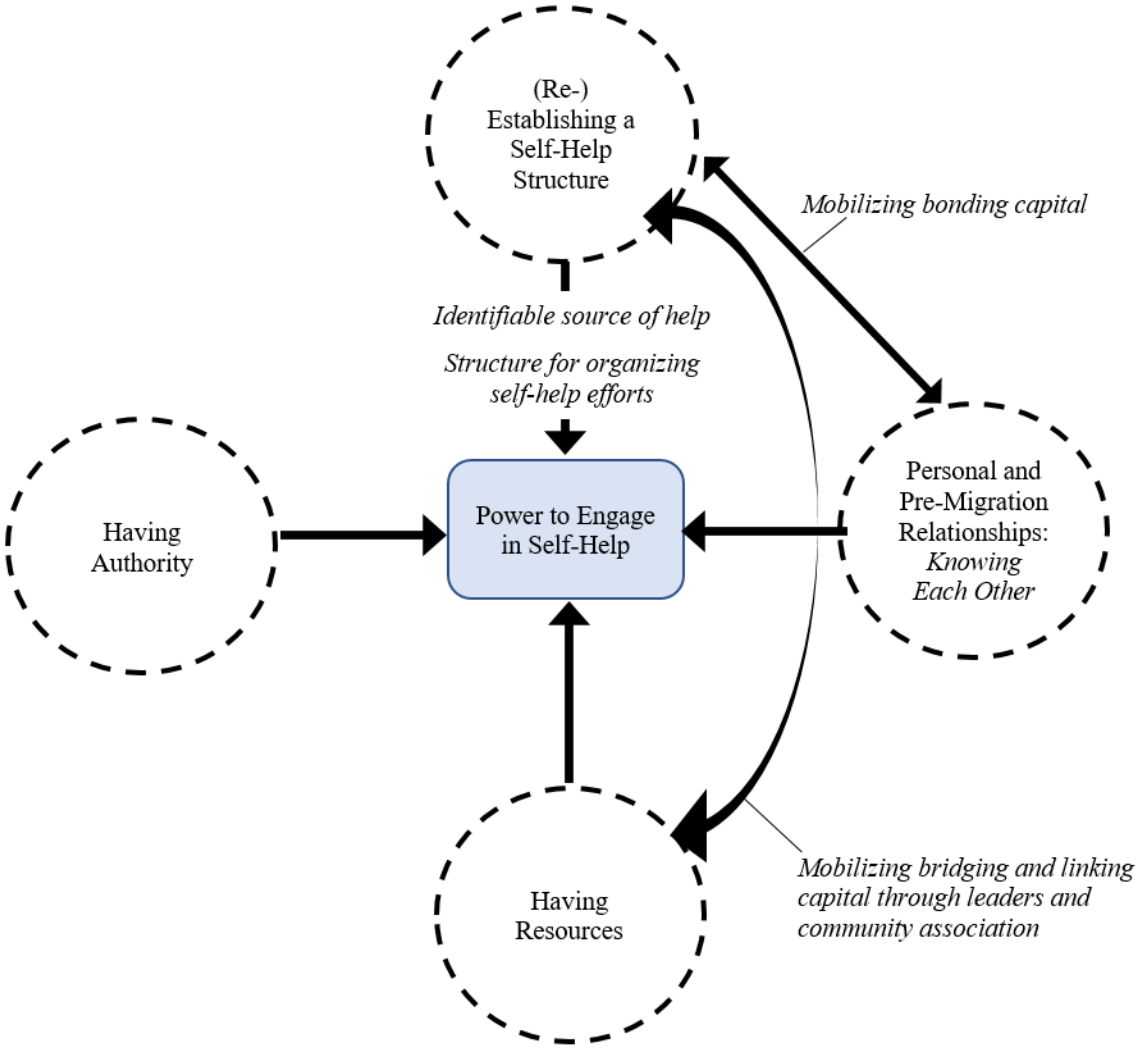

Figure 3. How (re-)establishing a self-help structure enhanced agency and capacity for self-help.

Category 2: Personal and Premigration Relationships: *Knowing Each Other*

As described in the previous category, Karen ways of helping each other were highly relational and collaborative. Karen women were motivated to help each other by a strong sense of moral and communal responsibility that was based in a shared identity of being Karen. While knowing someone was not necessary to be willing to help them, it did impact their ability to *successfully* help each other. As such, personal and premigration relationships emerged as a major category that affected women's agency and capacity to successfully help each other, specifically with family problems. This category emerged from three closely related codes of *knowing each other, being connected*, and *keeping each other close*.

The importance of having Karen community leaders who knew members of their community and were known by members of their community in resettlement was noted in Suter and Magnusson's (2015) study. In this category, I explain how and why personal relationships were related to power to engage in self-help in resettlement. First, I explain cultural norms regarding help-seeking and help-giving behavior and why personal relationships were important for being able to identify needs and proactively offer assistance. Second, I explain the cultural concept of *ah-na* as it relates to help-seeking, and how *not* knowing other Karen people in resettlement made it difficult for Karen women to be able to help each other. Finally, I describe cultural norms that explain how and why relationships were important for identifying and recruiting individuals for leadership roles in community associations, since people "did not nominate themselves" for these positions.

Cultural Dynamics of Help-Seeking and Help-Giving: *Ah-Na (,tge.)* and *Seeing Needs*

Karen cultural modes of help-seeking and help-giving behavior strongly depended on personal relationships. According to cultural norms, receiving help did not depend on the family's initiative or ability to ask for help. Rather, responsibility was on leaders to see that someone was in need and proactively respond to meet that need, captured by the code *Seeing Needs*. Normative behavior regarding help-seeking and help-giving was developed in village settings in Burma where people lived in small villages and regularly interacted. This setting allowed community leaders to "keep each other close," so they could "see needs" and resolve problems before they reached crisis (P3).

Furthermore, because everyone knew each other, family problems were public, and leaders felt confident in both their social diagnosis of the family dynamics causing the problems and the fact that others would agree. The following quotes illustrate village life in Burma and help-seeking and help-giving dynamics in this setting:

> In Burma, we all knew each other. In a small village, we all knew each other. . . . We had a small community in each area. . . . Everyone knew about family problems, because was in a small community (P3).

> [In Burma], the ones we were taking care of, we knew them. . . . For example, you knew my suffering, but I never opened my mouth to you to ask for help. The leader saw my suffering. So they tried to help me before I asked (P3).

> Even though you did not ask me for help, I already saw that you needed it because the community was so small, and we heard about each other (P3).

> [In Burma], when families were fighting and yelling, everyone was around. They crossed by. They saw it. . . . The village was very small, so people could see what was the problem, so they could go into the family and solve the problem (P8).

The concept of *ah-na* provided important cultural context for understanding capacity for self-help in resettlement. *Ah-na* is a Karen word borrowed from Burmese language that roughly translates to English as *hesitant* and was used to describe being hesitant to ask for help. This disposition toward help-seeking is illustrated in the following quotes: "Traditionally, the Karen people don't want to bring up their problem to anybody" (P3), and "Karen people don't want to talk. They don't want to express their feelings" (P10). In interviews, *ah-na* was used as an adjective, for example, "don't be *ah-na*," and as a verb, for example, "they *ah-na* you."

My interpreter/cultural consultant explained that being *ah-na* was similar but not the same as being shy, and that both influenced help-seeking behavior in Karen culture. Another cultural consultant explained that being *ah-na* was intended to show respect by not troubling others with your problems. Karen women were especially *ah-na* if they had many problems and/or needed a lot of help, for example: "when she has many problems, she might feel like, 'this is my problem. I don't want to bother you. You have already had to deal with my situation too much'" (P3); and "when they can see you are busy, they don't want to bother you. They *ah-na* you" (P10). This behavior was adaptive in the context of small villages in Burma or refugee camps in Thailand, where being ah-na was considered polite, respectful, and "giving the other person honor" (cultural consultant).

KCM and KCM–WC played important roles in facilitating relationship building in the community and in trying to (re-)establish a community surveillance function that allowed them to see needs. As described earlier, the purpose of creating sections and area leaders was to be able to connect people in need with leaders who were most likely to

know them. Furthermore, by establishing KCM when the Karen community was small, early leaders set a structure in place that community members could recognize if they needed help, which became increasingly important as the community continued to grow and become more anonymous. In these ways, Categories 1 and 2 are interrelated.

Help-giving: "Going into the family" to solve problems. Help initiated by community leaders was highly directive and involved telling individual family members how to change their behavior. In order to provide this type of help, women described processes of diagnosing the underlying dynamics contributing to family problems, for example, "[We] go into the family and solve the problem" (P8), and "We need to go into the family's life to collect what's going on. We need a lot of people [to help with that]" (P6). The process of social diagnosis and intervention, or "going into the family's life," involved visiting a family, obtaining each family member's perspective about the problem, providing education and support, and mediating between family members, described as helping families to "understand each other." Leaders advised families about what to do, educated them on behavioral expectations and consequences, and gave specific instructions about how to change their behavior based on their assessment of the family problem. For example,

> If you see that I am the person who made the problem, you need to tell me, 'ok, I understand you, and I understand your family, I think you should change something.' Teach them about anger management or anger. Tell them they should change something and explain to them what they should do. Explain that if they do that, you and your husband or you and your kids will understand each other (P3).

Following are several examples of how participants intervened to help Karen families, including "going into the family" to assess the causes of family problems and offering education and directive advice:

> I saw a lot of kids at home and the parents had a lack of knowledge in parenting. Sometimes the father was drinking and then disciplining the children, but it was not correct discipline. . . . In the house there were too many people and a lot of arguing. . . . We needed to find out the situation and then find out what were the family's weak points and what were the strong points. So we needed to point out to them, 'ok, I think you better change this, you better do this.' I think people need teaching and suggestions. . . . It's not that it will help 100% of people or 100% of people will change, but some will change. . . . At least try that. It's going to help (P3).

> Back home [in Burma] when the family situation came like this, we talked to them, pointed out the problems, watched over the family, and then educated them. We saw two people with a conflict, we saw their situation, but we didn't separate them, we built them up. We built up their trust of each other and we educated the family and helped support them and tried to help solve the problem. We educated them about what were the consequences of their behavior (P3).

> I start to ask the husband, what is the issue; what is the problem? I talk to the husband and after that talk to the wife and I process it together, who is wrong and who is right and what's going on. . . . I confirm the situation on the phone. Sometimes I go myself to their home and see and observe what happening in the house and what's going on (P8).

> I have a case that I spoke to the husband. The husband said that he came back from work and he is so tired. His wife is not cooking, and she is drinking [alcohol]. He has to cook. And then he also tries to use the restroom and the restroom is all messy. The house is so messy that you cannot even find an empty spot to stand. So that's how the fighting started. . . . Some of the couples need better communication in the house. If it's just related to housing and working, then we talk to the woman and say, 'if this is what your husband needs, and you are not working and [cooking and cleaning] is the only thing you need to do, then you should start to do it (P8).

Category 4 provides further discussion of women leaders' authority to diagnose and intervene in family problems in Burma and Thailand, and how resettlement impacted this authority.

Consequences of Not Knowing Each Other for Self-Help in Resettlement

While cultural dynamics of help-seeking and help-giving were adaptive to village and refugee camp contexts, the resettlement context was very different. Geographic placement policies in the United States, which have been referred to as a "broadcasting policy of resettlement," scatter refugee families across the country with little consideration of premigration relational networks (Westermeyer, 2011, p. 533). This posed several challenges for being able to *keep each other close* and *know each other* in resettlement and for being able to help each other. The Karen community in resettlement no longer resembled traditional villages or the refugee camps, where personal relationships provided the foundations for identifying and responding to family problems and where leaders were able to maintain close surveillance of their community. In resettlement, a Karen 'community' could be a group of complete strangers (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Shelley, 2001)

Thus, anonymity resulting from dispersal geographic placement policies disrupted women's ability to *see needs.* While the first families in Minnesota had either premigration relationships or knew of each other, at the time of study, increasing diversity of community members resettled from different regions in Burma and different refugee camps made it impossible for leaders to be familiar with all families in the resettlement setting (P6). When leaders did not witness the problems or know families

personally, it was difficult for them to understand what was causing the family problems and to know how to respond, as illustrated in the following quotes:

Here is not like in Burma. Here you don't know what's going on inside the house (P8).

> Back home, when we heard that a spouse was cheating, we took action. But here, we cannot take action, because we didn't see it, we only heard about it. We heard about it, but we need to prove it, so we cannot get involved . . . sometimes we don't know who is right or wrong. Is the wife wrong? Or is the husband wrong? We're not sure because we didn't witness it or see all the things in front of us. So we cannot tell (P3).

> We cannot trust one side. We have to figure out who started [the family conflict] first and then why that happened (P5).

(Re-) establishing personal relationships among community members, described by one cultural consultant as "rebuilding the village" was a deliberate strategy of KCM and KCM–WC. For example, area leaders were elected because they more likely to know the people in their area and were therefore better positioned to identify needs and provide assistance, as described by these two participants: "we have a small connection in each geographic area. We have area leaders there who know most of the family situations in that area. They are connected to each other" (P3) and "it's helpful to have each section and area leader . . . they are most helpful when they go and visit families, find out what is going on, what they need help with, and follow up with them. That is very helpful" (P8).

However, with compromised ability to *see needs* of all community members, leaders often had to rely on people to ask for help. Unfortunately, asking for help was a skill that few Karen women had. The code *Staying Silent* emerged during data analysis to describe women who were suffering from domestic violence in resettlement and did not

know how to ask for help. The following quotes explain how the concepts of *ah-na*, *staying silent*, and *not knowing each other* impacted women's power to help each other in resettlement: "Because nobody knows them, they cannot get help (P3),"

> Many people don't know how to find help or who to talk to. Even though one Karen women went to church every week, she just sat there and then came back home. I said to her, 'you go to church, you should open your mouth, say what do you need, look for help, make a friend, get a phone number from someone who can speak English. You go every week, but you just listen and go home . . . so if something happened in this country, you don't know who to call.' . . . She has friends, but she doesn't exactly know #1, #2, #3 —what she has to do or what she has to know [to ask for help] (P6).
>
> [In the U.S.], people who don't know how to get help or access services, they need to ask. Sometimes they don't ask. They don't come and tell you about their problem, especially Karen people. They don't like to tell you about their problem (P10).
>
> When they feel sad, they just cry, and they don't want to talk to you even though you are trying to tell them that you would like to help them. You want to know what's going on and you ask them, 'can you tell me?' They say 'no' . . . I ask them, 'do you have a problem with finances? Or do you need help with public assistance? We can help you.' They say 'no.' They don't open up. That's the problem (P10).

My cultural consultant highlighted an example shared by one participant (P2) to illustrate the challenges Karen women also faced in accessing mainstream services as a result of not knowing how to ask for help:

> Even though they go to meet with the school counselor, they don't know what kind of questions they are supposed to ask. And then the counselor can't help them. The parent only knows that their kids need to go to school every day, but how do you push them? The school counselor didn't give them any ideas, either. So they don't know how to ask the question, what to do, or how to get an answer.

One participant pointed out that not all Karen people were hesitant to ask for help. She added that when people were willing to ask for help, it made I much easier to help them:

> Some of the Karen people, they are so open. The mom who came to me with the child problem, she was very strong and she as very open. After she heard what was going on, she went to the school and she talked to the school. And she came to my organization and she opened up that she needed help. She said [what she is able to do], and that she can work with me and my organization. I really liked that, and it was very easy for me to work with her (P10).

However, she also said, "For those who keep everything in their heart . . . we don't know what's going on with them" (P10).

Findings described in this category further support a theoretical distinction between potential and actual bonding capital (Lin, 2008; Portes, 1998). They also support critiques of social capital definitions that define it narrowly as social cohesion and norms of trust and reciprocity, such as those conceptualized by Coleman (1998) and Putnam (1995, 2000). In this case, the power to engage in self-help in resettlement was shaped by more than mere existence of coethnic or bonding ties, social cohesion, or norms of trust and reciprocity. For example, having personal relationships (bonding ties) and willingness to help each other (social cohesion) did not necessarily result in help if leaders could not *see needs* and community members were not comfortable asking for help, most clearly illustrated in the following example:

> I have one family right now, their [family problem] has been going on a long time already. But as church leaders and community leaders, we didn't hear anything. By the time that we heard what was going on, the family had already broken up and fallen apart. They had four kids, and they separated. If we heard about it before, then a lot of friends are here and

> could have supported them, but nobody said anything to us. That was so sad (P3).

This finding also highlights the importance of understanding relational dynamics in their cultural context in understanding bonding capital. Lastly, it underscores the importance of assessing the value of bonding ties in relation to community-identified, rather than researcher-identified, outcomes.

Consequences of Not Knowing Each Other for Self-Help Organizing

Personal relationships, in particular premigration relationships, were also important for identifying and recruiting women with relevant knowledge and experience to serve in women's associations. Cultural norms dictated that leaders were elected by other community members who recognized and validated their leadership potential, including their skills, experience, and willingness to help in their community. Participants laughed when asked if anyone ever self-nominated for leadership positions, captured in the following responses: "Someone nominates them. They don't nominate themselves! [laughing out loud]" (P4). "No, I did not nominate myself [laughing]. The church members nominated me to be the leader" (P9). The following quotes explain the cultural dynamics prohibiting self-nomination and self-promotion:

> Even though someone knows how to be a leader, they just stop and do not nominate themselves. . . . Even if they have leadership experience, they don't want to talk about their experience. . . . In Karen culture, most of the time you have to ask them [to be a leader] first. And then they are willing to do it. If you don't ask, they just sit and look at you and what you're doing . . . and they do not speak up either (P5).

> Back home, we didn't even need to apply for a job. We didn't need to go to an interview [like in the U.S.], because somebody saw you. For example, they watched you when you were studying in school, and then if you were good, then they just nominated you and asked, 'do you want to come and join us?' (P5).

Community members were especially unlikely to nominate themselves for leadership positions in the United States when they felt like their previous knowledge or experiences were no longer useful and they lacked knowledge about their new context. In response, women leaders used relationship-building strategies to encourage participation in KCM–WC, including emphasizing their shared experiences, providing training and education, and validating women's previous knowledge and experiences, for example:

> Women look down on their self because in this country [the U.S.] everyone has education. They look down on their self because of the language barriers. They think they cannot [get involved in organizing]. So we go and talk to the women in each section. We tell them, 'even though you think you cannot do it, there is at least one good thing that you have to contribute that you don't know. We ourselves, we don't have education either, but we try our best to do it. So you could do that too' (P2).

When the Karen community organization was first formed in Minnesota, the community was very small, and it was easy to identify and recruit leaders and work together. Many people had previous relationships or knew of each other and were from similar areas in Burma. One participant recalled, "It was a small group, so we knew everybody. Just through friends and by friend to friend, we knew each other" (P6). However, as the community grew in size and diversity with ongoing resettlement, a lack of premigration relationships or familiarity with new arrivals made it more difficult to organize self-help efforts (P4). Practically, people from different camps spoke different dialects of Karen language, making it difficult to communicate (P1). One participant explained,

> Sometimes our Karen people are a little hard to organize when they came not only from Tham Hin Camp, but they from a lot of camps. They don't understand each other. And maybe they have different ways of doing things (P6).

My interpreter/cultural consultant explained that in the resettlement context, it could take time for people to get to know each other, build trust, and gain confidence to serve in a leader role, saying,

> When they arrive here, some leaders are from different regions and refugee camps. They are not close to each other. They never knew each other in the camps. They feel like they have to follow the leaders here first before doing something. Because people that arrived here before them, they know more stuff. And also, they interpreted for them when they arrived, [so they defer to them].

She further explained,

> It will take a while to get confidence and close to that person. It takes a while to connect to each other and know what they can do. . . . If they don't know that person, they are shy to speak up. For example, at an event or meeting, when you don't know people, they hesitate . . . they are *ah-na* and shy.

Active leadership has been identified as critical to the successful organization of refugee community associations (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014). This study contributes knowledge about specific cultural dynamics that impact nomination of community leaders and therefore a community's ability to form a functioning association. It provides further evidence of the importance of assessing the value of bonding ties in their cultural context. According to participants in this study, despite the existence of relational ties, if community members did not know someone's premigration experiences with leadership, that person's skills could remain unutilized.

Figure 4 depicts how having personal and premigration relationships directly impacted women's power to engage in self-help. First, personal and premigration relationships enabled leaders to *see needs* and proactively provide assistance and solve problems without requiring community members to ask for help. Second, *knowing each*

other was important for identifying and recruiting leaders with skills and abilities to serve in the community association and to help others. As such, Categories 1 and 2 were closely related.

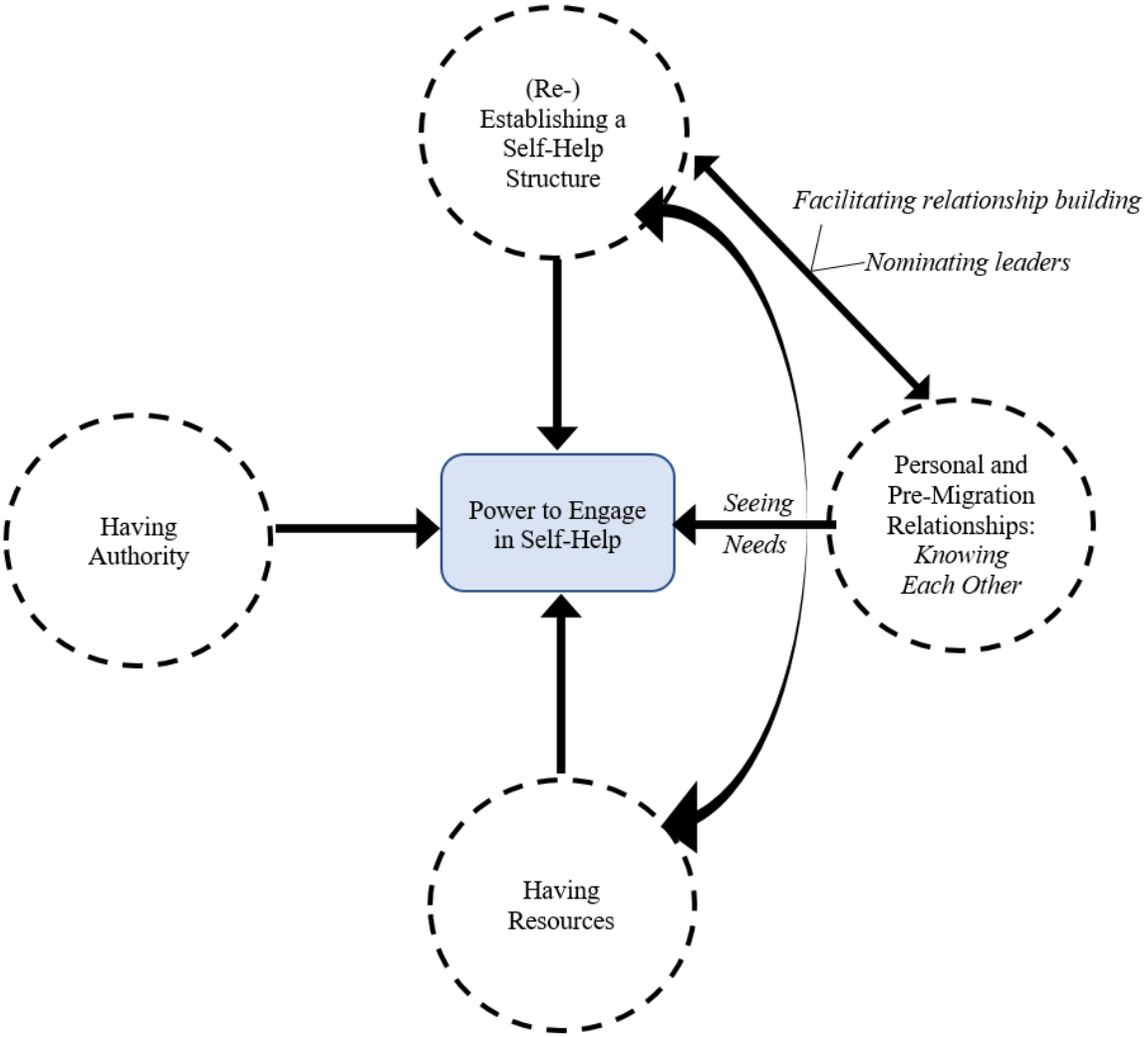

Figure 4. How personal and premigration relationships impacted power to engage in self-help.

Category 3: Having Resources

This category describes resources that women needed to effectively help each other in resettlement. These resources included knowledge, time, transportation, and financial resources. Each is described below.

Knowledge

Two types of knowledge emerged as impacting women's power to help each other in resettlement. First, knowledge of historical self-governance structures was essential to being able to (re-)form self-help structures in resettlement. Second, having knowledge about U.S. systems and resources or what they referred to as *knowing the system here* emerged as affecting Karen women's capacity for self-help in resettlement. There was a general feeling among participants that most Karen women did not have access to adequate knowledge relevant to the resettlement context, which severely limited their ability to help each other. Not having this knowledge also impacted women's perceptions of their own self-efficacy. Additionally, many Karen women regarded their previous knowledge and experiences from Burma and Thailand as no longer useful in resettlement. Lastly, participants felt that if Karen women could get more knowledge about U.S. systems and resources, they would have more agency and capacity to engage in self-help. Disseminating knowledge through bonding networks was one way of building knowledge to build capacity for self-help.

Knowledge of premigration self-governance structures. Karen leaders who established KCM and the KCM–WC had experience with Karen customary governance systems in Burma and Thailand, and adapted and implemented these models in

resettlement. Although Karen self-help structures themselves were adaptable to being (re-)built in resettlement, not all Karen communities in the United States (re-)built them. Knowledge of these structures and how to adapt them in resettlement was embodied knowledge. Participants explained that leaders who had premigration knowledge and experience developing and adapting these structures were critical to the formation of KCM and KCM–WC. One man, in particular, was named by every participant who talked about the process of establishing KCM and the KCM–WC (P3, 4, 6, 7). For example, "when [male leader] came, he had already been doing this system in the camp. . . . He had experience from when he was in the refugee camp" (P6). Other participants talked about how premigration knowledge and experiences were critical to the formation of KCM and KCM–WC:

> We knew that [system] since we were back in Thailand and Burma. When we arrived here, we joined with [male leader], [female leader], [male leader], [male leader], and we organized together. [Male leader] knew how the sections ran and what each title was supposed to do. So we just started talking together. After working together, we had different ideas. We put our ideas together about how we should run each section and each title (P7).

> [Female leader] had experience with that system and was also a teacher in the refugee camp. And [male leader] also, and [male leader]. They were already teachers in the camp. And others had helped with women's groups, like [female leader]. And [male leader] was working with the Burmese student groups. I think for me it was a blessing that people with this experience arrived and gave their heart to helping their people (P6).

Leaders from Minnesota who had this knowledge and experience also played important roles in helping Karen communities in other states to (re-)establish self-help structures, including communities in Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, California, and Colorado (P4, 6, 7). Minnesota Karen leaders traveled to these locations

to help these communities develop their own “constitutions” or “community policies” to establish a basic structure. They then helped organize and hold an election to nominate local people to leadership positions (P7). The following quote describes the process of assisting Karen communities in other states to form self-help structures. It also highlights the adaptability of these structures to different resettlement contexts:

> [When we travel to other states], we just tell them our experience. . . . We have a structure, so they can look at it, but they don’t need to copy it. Or if they want to, they can do that. But they have to look at their situation there, and then if there is something they want to add, then they can add it. If there is something they have to delete, then delete it. . . . Their state might be different, but they can do whatever they can do. . . . The structure depends on the background of the people living in the area; they create their own policies” (P4).

This participant gave an example of how other communities might adapt the Minnesota model by adding or deleting different committees.

Knowledge of U.S. systems and resources: *Knowing the system here*. The second type of knowledge that emerged as impacting women’s power to help each other in resettlement was knowledge about U.S. systems and existing U.S. resources, described by participants as *knowing the system here.* There was a general feeling among participants that most Karen women in Minnesota lacked this type of knowledge. In particular, they were unable to help with family problems because they were unfamiliar with legal systems and relevant resources, for example, domestic violence shelters. Overall, lacking knowledge of systems and resources in resettlement presented practical barriers to being able to help each other as well as perceived barriers, as it was related to feelings of self-efficacy or belief in one’s ability to be helpful. Several responses by participants and my interpreter/cultural consultant exemplified these sentiments:

> Our team [area] leaders and women's groups, we work together, but women leaders don't understand the situation here. They know how to help a woman in that situation in Burma, but they don't know how to connect them to the resources here [in the U.S.]. It's very hard for them. . . . Those who know the system in Minnesota are very few. . . . Even though we try to protect people or we try to help them, it doesn't fit with what they need. It doesn't help the family (P3).

> Family problems are legal problems, so it's hard for us to help, because as leaders, we don't understand how to solve the problems. We don't understand the legal situation in the U.S. . . . The big challenge right now is about the family situation. It is the family situation that we cannot deal with or we don't have the solution that we can give that person, like a hope or a goal (P3).

> Part of the problem is that most Karen women don't know how to work with the shelter or the people who are advocates. . . . They don't know that they can divide the family and take women to the women's shelter. They don't know that they can do that. They thought only the government or police could do that (interpreter/cultural consultant).

> They don't know where the husband should go for someone to give him punishment. . . . They don't know that if they want a divorce they can just go and file for a divorce (interpreter/cultural consultant).

> Some women feel like they are not educated. They don't know how to speak English. They would like to get involved, but it's hard for them (P10).

> Women do not get involved with women's organizations because they are worried they don't know the resources (P5).

> If no one gives us the training, I don't know about those [domestic violence] resources (P9).

Knowledge overlapped with the second category of personal and premigration relationships as they related to self-help, because even though a leader may have had a personal relationship with someone and knew what type of help they needed, if they did not have knowledge about how to connect them to resources, they might still be unable to help them.

Challenges adapting previous knowledge and experience. Some women did have extensive experience with women's organizations or in professional helping roles in Burma and Thailand. Several participants described that they felt like they had more power to help Karen women in Burma and Thailand because they had knowledge relevant to those contexts, for example, about women's rights, appropriate child discipline, political empowerment, how to help with family problems, how to support the recovery of women and children who were victims of violence, and how to connect to legal authorities and social service systems (P1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Furthermore, many Karen women were social workers or teachers in refugee camps or had significant experience with the KWO (P1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8). One participant explained that in Thailand, school principals called her when they observed child abuse, and she gathered mothers and trained them on appropriate child discipline (P2). She also ran a women's shelter and supported the emotional recovery of women and children who experienced abuse.

However, these participants struggled to apply their premigration knowledge of how to help Karen women in the resettlement context. When I asked the previously quoted participant if worked with women's shelters in the United States, she said, "no, I haven't worked with them yet" (P2) and said that it was because she was not familiar with these resources in the United States. In general, women felt like their previous knowledge and experiences were not useful in resettlement, partially because norms and laws were different, as illustrated in the following quotes:

> Back home [in Burma], we only had a small village. We only knew a small little thing, and we could act with our small little thing. But here [in the U.S.], your small little thing, you cannot use it here, because it's a big country! . . . So it's hard (P3).

> Back there [in Burma and Thailand], we got only a little education, but it was enough, like how to understand each other, how to be mature, and simple things like teaching kids how to grow up. Some of what we knew we learned from our parents. But then when we came here, the kids are getting more education, going to school, learning more and better things than us. It's harder for us to teach them, because they know more than us (P1).

> The education that we were giving to our community [in Burma] is a little different than the culture and system here. Even though we want to teach women here, the laws here are different than in Burma for everything. For example, how to discipline kids, you cannot do the same thing that we were doing in Burma. What we thought was appropriate discipline [in Burma], here [in the U.S.] it is not considered appropriate discipline (P3).

One participant had been a KWO leader for over 20 years in Burma and Thailand, so I was surprised when she said during her interview that she was not very active with women's organizations in the United States. In the following quote, she explained that she was less active because she did not have knowledge of U.S. systems and did not feel like her previous knowledge or experiences were useful in the resettlement context:

> In America, it would be hard for me to organize Karen women, because it's hard to learn from the old culture stuff about how to start a new life. Before going forward to organize Karen women, I would have to learn all the laws and the culture here first. I don't think I can do it (P1).

She also added that the trainings she developed with the KWO in Burma and Thailand were no longer relevant or useful to in the United States, because the norms and laws were so different (P1). My interpreter/cultural consultant challenged this prevalent sentiment of participants, while recognizing that it was how most Karen women felt: "they can use some of their old knowledge here in Minnesota, but they feel like it's not really valuable or worthwhile at all."

Another reason women felt they could not use their knowledge and experiences in resettlement was because they were unable to become recredentialed or meet U.S.

requirements to practice in the same professional roles as their previous experience. For example, “back in Burma, we had a lot of women who were teachers and medics, but here in the United States, they are not licensed teachers” (P1) and,

> Many of the families who came from the refugee camps, they had teacher experience or they had social worker experience. But here, because of the language and then because they require us to have a degree to do those jobs, they just step back and say they cannot do it, because they don’t have a degree and don’t have people who can support them (P5).

> I am not a social worker and I did not graduate from legal service school, right? Sometimes I feel like I don't have all of the power, because one social worker told me that to be able to complete the order for protection form and child support form you have to have a license. You have to be a social worker . . . but I don't have a certificate, and I am not a legal agent person. So I feel like I have less power . . . I don’t want to fill out those forms . . . I’m scared. I don’t want to break the law (P10).

As the quotes in this section suggest, significant knowledge and experience that Karen women had about how to help their community was underutilized in resettlement.

Knowledge that is relevant to the resettlement context, captured in the category *knowing the system here*, represents a form of cultural capital, defined previously as knowledge, educational or professional qualifications or credentials, or linguistic abilities relevant to and legitimized by a dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1986). Existing research indicates that pioneer communities and Karen people, specifically, often lack sufficient cultural capital or access to cultural capital relevant to their resettlement settings due to their limited time and experience in these settings (Haines et al., 1981; Owusu, 2000; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Karen people have been identified as a group that has had few opportunities to obtain education, literacy, or significant employment histories as a result of the civil war, and a result, have low cultural capital relevant to resettlement

contexts (Worland, 2015). Consistent with findings from Worland (2015), this study also found that most Karen people lacked familiarity with the resettlement setting and faced language barriers that made it difficult to connect to U.S. systems and services. Additionally, it provides support for existing research that suggests that migrants lose much of the value and relevance of their existing cultural capital when they resettle to a new context (Csedo, 2008; Erel, 2010).

Without adequate cultural capital, participants in this study faced barriers to accessing resources in their new context, which is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of the role of cultural capital in developing bridging ties to obtain outside resources (see also Ryan et al., 2008). However, as previously described in Category 1, KCM and KCM–WC leaders have been able to access some bridging and linking resources that benefited the whole community (e.g., advocating that interpreters be provided in healthcare settings). Thus, findings provide further evidence for Suter and Magnusson's (2015) conclusion, that "the bridging ties that some network members are able to create can mitigate the paucity of capital of other members of the network" (p. 101).

Sharing knowledge to build capacity for self-help. Two participants reported feeling like they had adequate power to help with family problems in resettlement, because they had knowledge, training, and established relationships with U.S. resources for responding to family problems (P8, 10). One participant explained that she "got to know the system" in the United States by attending a 30-hour training on how to help

women who were experiencing intimate partner violence and by visiting and building a referral relationship with a women's shelter:

> Regarding the shelter and the people that I work with there, I observed their location. I saw that they have Asian food. Women were afraid that they wouldn't be able to communicate with other people [because the shelter didn't always have an interpreter], and they felt like they were going to be lonely in the shelter. But the food and place was really comfortable. I liked the place there (P8).

By observing the location first-hand, she felt like she was able to facilitate successful referrals because she could address the fears and concerns of Karen women. The second participant described obtaining knowledge about U.S. systems and resources through on-the-job training related to intimate partner violence, child abuse, and divorce. She said,

> I feel like I know the resources, so I can help my clients and teach them how to access the resources. Most of our clients, they don't know how to speak English. If they need help, they don't know how to access the services, and they don't know how to access the resources. So I provide them with the services and resources (P10).

These participants explained that if more Karen women got education about U.S. systems, they would be more active with KCM–WC and in helping each other. For example, "some women are frustrated, but when you get to know the system, then it gets easier" (P8). Both participants had plans for increasing KCM–WC's agency and capacity for self-help by sharing their knowledge and providing education about U.S. systems and resources:

> I feel like if some Karen leaders went to each location and section and gave a training, like how to take care of the family, safety, and stuff like that, not a lot, and not all at the same time, but I feel like little by little they will be more active [with KCM–WC] . . . I believe that if we started small, with a visitor and each leader going to visit and talk to them, encourage them that they can do it, then they will also go and provide support and be the person to help others too (P8).

The second participant was not active with KMC–WC, but planned to meet with them to share her knowledge about U.S. systems and resources related to intimate partner violence. She also wanted to partner with them to help Karen women and families. She shared, “I am willing to teach them and tell them what I am doing so that we can work together and can handle the things that happen. As I know and do, I would like them to know how to do, too” (P10). She also wanted to educate Karen women, generally, about the importance of asking for help in the United States, as well as how to support others in their community who are experiencing domestic violence:

> I want more Karen people in the community to open up more about what they are feeling in their heart and not to be silent. I want them to reach out to the community leaders or the community organizations and say what they are feeling and not be afraid of their situation. . . . I want Karen people to be more involved and work more with each other’s situation, each other’s problem. For example, if . . . a woman got abused from her husband and she’s scared and she doesn’t want to report that because she’s scared something is going to happen after her husband got out from the jail, I want the other people and the neighbors, especially Karen, to work with her and tell her what she is supposed to do and not to afraid, and I want them to support each other (P10).

My interpreter/cultural consultant similarly explained that educating women would improve feelings of self-efficacy, saying, “I think if Karen women knew and they were introduced to the system here, they would feel more confident about who they should call, who they should work with.”

As the descriptions in this category exemplify, increasing women’s knowledge about U.S. systems and resources was linked to increased perceptions of self-efficacy as well as actual power and ability to help each other. This category thus illustrated another

pathway through which the self-help potential of bonding ties was mobilized to create actual resources, as captured in the following quote:

> I think the way we work together in Karen society is great. If I compare with other societies, I'm really proud to be Karen. We understand each other, and we are all willing to help each other. The only thing is that we have a lack of education. We don't have knowledge and education about the rules or laws or how stuff works in the big country (P3).

In this way, Categories 2 and 3 were related, because resources, including knowledge, could be shared through relational networks to build community members' capacity to help each other.

Time: "We Don't Have Time at All"

Nearly every participant talked about having less time to help their community in the United States than they did in Burma and Thailand (P1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). One major difference was that Karen women leaders in Burma or Thailand had full-time volunteer or paid roles or received small salaries to help their community, as explained by one participant: "back home we had leaders who were full-time volunteers to help. They had more time. But here [in the United States], we don't have full-time volunteers to help" (P3). Rather, in the United States, women often worked in full-time jobs that were not related to helping their community, which left much less time for volunteer activities (P1, 2, 6, 7, 8). The following quotes highlight the challenges women faced in helping their community in resettlement as a result of limited time: "I don't really have enough time [to help everybody]. Sometimes I don't even have enough time to sleep" (P8).

> Here all the families, we have to survive. The husband has to work. The wife has to work. And then there's no time. We don't have time at all. So the only time we can gather or meet is in church or Saturday or Sunday (P1).

In Burma and Thailand, women also worked as social workers, medics, or teachers and could help their community as part of their jobs. In resettlement, fewer Karen women had opportunities to serve their community in these roles, because their previous credentials were not recognized in the resettlement context (P1, 5). Four participants, all who spoke English, did provide some services to help their community as part of their jobs, and often went beyond their professional roles to help women and families they worked with (P3, 4, 5, 10).

Different work schedules provided another challenge for coordinating and providing self-help efforts, for example,

> Some people work at nighttime, some people at daytime, and then it's hard for us to meet together. It's like, you have a plan, you want to do it, but it's hard to get together and then set up what you can do. . . . Here [in the U.S.], it's really hard (P5).

A second participant had been trying to meet with another Karen leader to learn about a substance use treatment program he was involved with, but they were not able to coordinate time to meet:

> He would like to meet with me on Saturday, but I am not available. And he said he also works with [another leader], and she is only available on another day. So I had to say that right now, I am not available those times (P2).

Another indicator of having limited time was that, at the time of this study, the KCM–WC no longer held their own meetings, and gathered only for broader KCM meetings:

> When I first came here [KCM–WC] called our own meetings, like every two months. But right now, we are kind of busy, each area and each person. So we prefer to meet the same time with KCM meetings. It's easier to come together at the same time, because we have so many reasons to come together. If we do not include everyone together, we would have so many meetings. And we don't have time (P3).

Three participants also described that their children discouraged their volunteer roles, because they did not have enough time to spend with their own families, as captured in the following quotes:

> My kids always say, 'since you came to the U.S., you have always worked for the Karen people . . . you only work with your own people and you don't have time for us. You don't have time for us at all' (P7).

> Sometimes I have to fight with my family to help other families. But I don't blame them, because I am a mother, I am a wife, and at that time [when I'm helping others], I am not home. Sometimes when I'm helping people, I don't want my family to be angry at me. You know, my son, he cries. Sometimes I don't want to think it. When I see his face, it hurts. . . . If I see a family that doesn't know how to speak English and doesn't have a car, I help them. But on the other side, my own family needs me to go and prepare things for them (P6).

An additional factor related to time was that leaders in Minnesota often had multiple leadership roles. For example, they were leaders in both the KCM–WC and in their churches, which was not the norm in Burma or Thailand (P3). This further limited the time they could contribute to each role. At the time of this study, a few participants talked about how they were considering working more through churches rather than through KCM–WC in order to be more efficient with time and transportation, since Karen people already gathered regularly at churches (P1, P3, P4, P7).

Geographic Proximity and Transportation

Almost all participants talked about how it was easier to gather in Burma and Thailand than in the United States, which made it easier to collaborate, communicate, and help their community, for example,

> It was easier to gather together in Thailand. . . . In zone and section places, we had leaders. I told this leader [about a KWO meeting]. This leader told the other zone place leader, and then we said, 'today we are going to meet,' and then we picked a time. Then we had a leader that went around

> and told other women that we were going to meet at this place and this time (P1).
>
> In the refugee camp, we could walk to the location of the meeting, because it was not that far (P1).
>
> In Burma, when we said, 'come together, let's talk,' everyone called their other friends and we came together, walked together. We didn't need transportation (P7).
>
> Back home in Thailand everybody can walk and then do things. At that time, we didn't even have phones. . . . They just came to the office and then we got together. But here it's really hard, especially in the winter time. Nobody goes to church to help at all (P5).

In the United States, however, women required transportation to be involved with women's associations. This presented challenges, as many Karen women in the United States did not drive (P5), as described by this participant:

> It's hard right now in America. We have women's group in the church, but we have less people who can come. . . . Most of the women here don't drive. . . . They are scared to drive. . . . They just wait for their husbands to drive them. Then husbands are working, and it's a problem (P5).

Without their own transportation, women had to rely on family members, who they noted also did not have time. For example, "Not every woman knows how to drive. To get together you have to use your family members, and they don't have time either. So it also takes some other people's time to get together" (P1). Taking the bus was also described as too challenging for Karen women who did not speak English (P5).

At the time KCM and KCM–WC were formed, Karen leaders lived close to each other in the same apartment building, and could easily communicate and get together (P4, P7). One participant explained:

> At that time [when we formed KCM and KCM–WC] we didn't have too many people, and then we lived together in the same place. There were a lot of Karen people who lived there . . . we just lived next to each other in

> the building. Even though we didn't have a phone, we could just knock on the door and say 'we have a meeting right now' or 'there's something we have to do.' So they would say, 'okay, let's talk!' That's how we did it (P4).

One of the reasons given for why Karen leaders in other states had not formed community associations was that resettlement agencies placed Karen families in housing that was far away from other Karen families, and they were not able to get to each other or gather regularly. One participant explained, "In other states, they live far away from each other. . . . They don't have the opportunity to get together and organize because they live so far away from each other" (P7). The geographic dispersal of refugees, including within cities and local areas has been identified as a barrier to the formation of refugee associations in several resettlement countries (Lejukole, 2008; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013). In this way, this category is related to Category 1, because being able to gather was necessary to be able to build and utilize a community association.

Financial Resources

Research with other refugee-background communities has found that a lack of financial resources impacted a community's capacity for self-help and mutual aid (Borman, 1984; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Smith, 2013). At the time of study, KCM and KCM–WC were funded entirely by donations from within the Karen community, including membership dues. These resources were used to support Karen families with food, clothing, and to create a revolving loan program to assist families with rent or other financial needs. Money was also raised to celebrate cultural events and holidays.

However, several participants stated that more financial resources were needed to help Karen women (P2, 3, 4, 6, 7). One participant described wanting to have a paid "resource connection person" who could support KCM–WC leaders in connecting Karen women and families to existing resources (P3). Interestingly, no participant mentioned wanting financial resources from outside their community. One participant explicitly stated that KCM–WC wanted to remain volunteer and community-funded, and was hesitant to accept money from outside sources because, "if we get paid, then it will be something that controls our job and our work. So we don't want that. We just want to be free. We want to help our own way" (P4). This participant was familiar with the requirements of receiving outside funding because she was also involved with a Karen nonprofit organization in St. Paul. This finding supports other research that refugee voluntary associations may be hesitant to accept government or outside funding because they could affect their ability to be self-regulating and governing, which are defining features of voluntary associations (Borman, 1984; Griffiths et al., 2005). This finding also illustrates a tension between not having enough resources available from within the community to meet all community needs, and not wanting to accept outside resources, which could restrict their activities and effectiveness and make them less responsive to their community's needs.

Figure 5 depicts how having resources (knowledge, time, transportation, and financial) impacted women's power to engage in self-help. First, not having knowledge about U.S. systems and resources and losing the value of their previous knowledge, as well as not having time, transportation, or adequate financial resources practically

impacted women's ability to help each other. Second, knowledge about historical self-help structures, time and transportation to be able to gather, and financial resources were also needed to support a viable association. Third, some women leaders were able to compensate for other community members' lack of cultural capital by developing bridging and linking ties and distributing the benefits of these ties (including knowledge) through bonding networks. This role has been identified in existing literature (Lacroix et al., 2015), and information sharing, in particular about resettlement services and resources, has been identified as an important function of bonding ties (Cederberg, 2012; McMichael & Manderson, 2004).

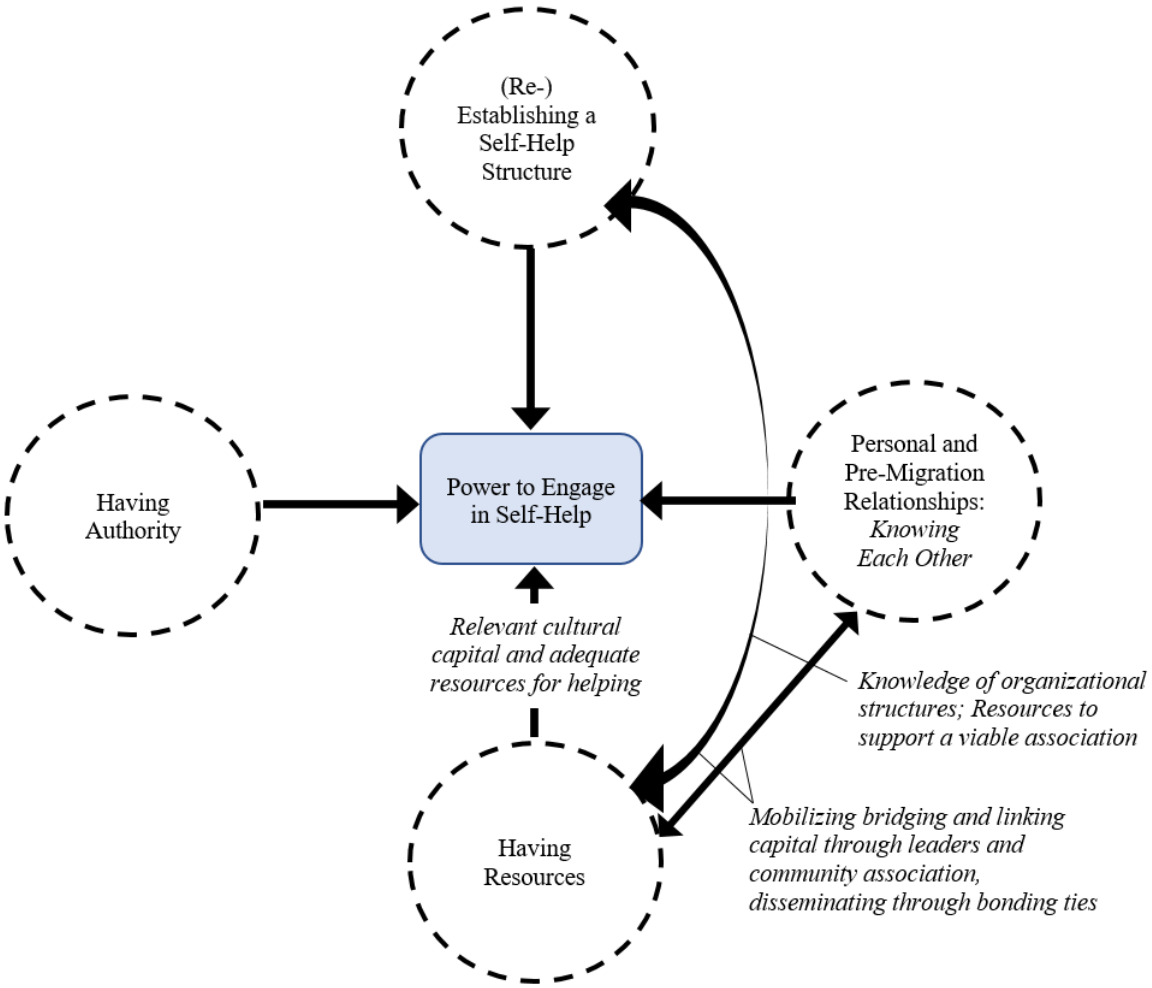

Figure 5. How having resources impacted power to engage in self-help.

Category 4: Having Authority

Participants described losing authority when they resettled to the US, which affected their ability to help each other, in particular, their ability to intervene to solve family problems. The types of authority included in these findings can be described as rational–legal authority and traditional authority (Weber, 1947). In this category, I explain the types of authority Karen women had in Burma and Thailand, how they experienced loss of authority in the United States, and the challenges they had connecting to U.S. social and legal systems to regain authority to help each other in resettlement. Descriptions of having authority in Burma and Thailand provide context for understanding participants' experiences in resettlement.

Having Authority in Burma and Thailand

Several factors combined to give Karen women's organizations authority in Burma and Thailand. First, by establishing customary governance systems, Karen people were able to establish legal authority to make and enforce laws, evidenced by the quote: "Back in our own place, the decisions came from our own Karen leaders. We had our own rules and laws. Things that we wanted to do we could make happen and get to the outcome that we wanted" (P2). Five women who came from areas of Burma and Thailand where Karen people had established customary governance systems described having more power because they were "under our own leaders" (P1, 2, 3, 4, 5). One participant said, "in our country, we could do stuff that we wanted to because we were under our own leaders;" "the upper leaders [were Karen]" (P2). "Upper leaders" referred

to village heads in Burma, Karen military leaders in military areas, or the refugee camp committee leaders in the refugee camps (P2, Interpreter/cultural consultant).

Max Weber (1947) defined authority as legitimate power and "the probability that certain commands (or all commands) from a given source will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (p. 324). He conceptualized *rational–legal authority*, or bureaucratic authority, as authority exercised through institutions, laws, and bureaucracies that create order in society. Though not a modern state, which is traditionally considered to have rational–legal authority, Karen customary governance systems were able to establish democratic systems with *legitimate authority* in some areas, as constituents generally approved of the legitimacy and binding authority of their political system (Weber, 1947). Within feminist studies, another way of conceptualizing the type of power held by political systems is *power over* or *power as domination* (Lloyd, 2013).

Karen women's organizations in some areas of Burma and refugee camps in Thailand were able to access legal authority in two important ways. First, they were able to connect to leaders of broader power structures. Women described working closely with their "upper leaders" and felt like they were responsive to their needs, as evidenced in the following statements: "back in our country, the location that we lived, we could do almost everything. The upper people were guiding us and supporting us" (P2) and "in Thailand, we were very engaged, because we were under our own people who spoke our own language . . . we experienced the same things, so we liked to talk about similar stuff, like [what our community needed]" (P2). My interpreter/cultural consultant added:

> Why they had power in Burma is because they knew [the upper leaders] well. They were connected to people. They knew the people in their area

> and the people who they worked with. If they wanted to say something or speak up, they could talk to each other more . . . they felt more confident that they could do more things together.

In these settings women leaders shared a common language, common experiences, and common goals of helping their community with upper leaders, which facilitated collaboration and power to help Karen families. In other words, not only did they have access to legal authority through their relationships with political leaders, but they felt that the broader power structures were responsive to the needs of Karen families.

Second, Karen women's organizations played official roles in the social service systems in some settings, such as running women's shelters and child protection systems in the refugee camps (P2, P3, P4). Their power was also backed up by legal authority, as they were connected to these systems. Following are several quotes from participants who provided social services and were connected to broader customary governance structures in Burma and refugee camps in Thailand. These quotes illustrate their experiences of having access to *rational–legal authority* or *power over*, specifically to intervene to resolve family problems. Participants described their power and authority as the ability to "divide the family" (for example, sending an abusive husband to jail or keeping a women in a shelter) and "make decisions for [the family]" (for example, telling the family when they could get back together):

> For women who were abused, we sent them to our women's committee shelter. If there were kids involved, we could pick up the women and children who were being abused and take them to our shelter . . . we could keep the abuser in jail, because we created our rule of law, so we could keep them" (P2).

> If the person who was abusing didn't want to change [their behavior], then the woman still stayed in the women's shelter and the husband still stayed in the youth shelter[13] until they were ready to change (P2).

> If a woman who was abusing her children didn't try to learn or try to change [her behavior], we could keep them forever (P2).

> Down there [in Burma and Thailand], women leaders could divide the family. They had the power, like they could tell the husband 'you go with the youth committee, your wife comes here' (interpreter/cultural liaison).

> In Burma if we found out somebody was abusing, wife or husband, we went and talked to them. We told the husband—'you cannot do this. If you do this you will have this problem.' And then we disciplined them, we educated them. If they continued it, in Burma, and then we let the leader know. If it was in the village, we let the village leader know. If they were in the military, we let their captain know. If they were office staff, we let their leader know that this family, this person, have this kind of behavior and attitudes. So they took action on that (P3).

A second type of authority that women had in Burma and Thailand was *traditional authority* (Weber, 1947). According to Weber (1947), traditional authority is based on established tradition and respect for cultural customs and social structures. Karen culture is a hierarchical culture that bestowed significant authority on community leaders, especially religious leaders. Thus, traditional authority included moral authority. A complex relationship exists between legal and traditional authority, and social and political contexts in Burma and Thailand supported both. For example, legal authority was backed up traditional authority. If family problems could not be solved through counseling a family, legal consequences could be applied. Consequently, Karen women's organizations were able to establish significant powers of social control.

[13] The youth shelter in the refugee camp referenced in this quote had a program for abusive men.

Experiences not having legal authority in Burma or Thailand. Three participants did not come from areas of Burma or refugee camps in Thailand when and/or where established Karen customary governance systems had systematic responses to intimate partner violence and family problems (P7, 8, 10). One participant lived in a refugee camp before these systems were set up:

> When I lived in the refugee camp, we did have camp leaders, but that system had not happened. . . . In the refugee camp there were no police to take the husband away to protect the wife. If the family had a problem, the women and children just got out of the house for their safety. They went to live with their relative or their family (P10).

However, she explained that systems had been developed in the refugee camp since she came to the United States over a decade ago:

> Since I moved to the U.S. I heard a lot of things changed [in the refugee camp] and they have good services, like if a woman has a problem with her husband, they have leaders who can help, and they built a place like a jail (P10).

Two participants lived in active combat zones in Burma where they were constantly displaced and did not spend prolonged time in refugee camps before coming to the United States (P7, 8). One explained that while she did not live in areas where Karen people had established bureaucratic systems capable of responding to intimate partner violence, she knew of these systems in other parts of the country:

> Down there [in Burma] . . . there was no process for what to do to help the family . . . it was not really easy [to protect the family from an abusive husband]. For example, if the husband was really drunk, all they could do was put him in [a bamboo structure where their legs were immobilized] for just one night and then let him go the next day. But the husband didn't have to go through any other things . . . In the town and village where I lived, we didn't have that process. But I believe that in the Karen State, on the border, they might have some of the rules and processes to do that."

Loss of Authority in Resettlement

Forming a community association has been identified as one mechanism for re-establishing authority in resettlement (Owusu, 2000). In Minnesota, by forming KCM, Karen leaders created a hierarchical organizational structure with elected leaders through which they could (re-)gain some legitimacy and authority for the role of "leader." For example, the following quote describes how KCM leaders maintained some traditional authority to advise families who were having problems in resettlement: "They listen to us if we go with the group of KCM leaders and talk to them" (P4).

However, while they were able to (re-)establish some traditional authority by creating a community association, this authority was largely weakened in resettlement, for many reasons. First, they were no longer able to exercise legal authority to back up their traditional and moral authority. Immediately upon resettling, Karen leaders lost the legal authority they had established in Burma and Thailand as they became part of U.S. legal systems, described in the following quotes:

> The moment you step in this country you are part of the government, starting with the government food system and health care system . . . and we are all refugees, the same, so we can't go arrest the person like we could according to our camp regulations back there (P2).

> Here [in the U.S.], it's different, because we're not under our own people. We feel like we don't have much opportunity [to help our community] . . . Here we are under different leaders, so we can't do everything that we could do in our country (P2).

> I don't see that we are disciplining the community much because the legal system here already has their own discipline. Even though you try to put more discipline to them, they are not going to listen to you. . . . They have to listen to and take the discipline here (P3).

They also lost their official social service role, which was also replaced by U.S. systems:

> [The Karen women's group in Minnesota is] not legally known. It's not an organization that signed an agreement with the government. So we just volunteer to help people (P2).
>
> If kids were involved in cases of domestic violence in Thailand, we could pick up the women and children and take them to our shelter. But here, we can't keep the family or keep the kids, because the kids have to go through the government when there's an issue with a couple that goes forward like that. It has to be reported to child protection (P2).
>
> When the couple is married here [in the U.S.] it is legally. They go to the government regarding being married legally, so it's up to the government to decide, if the couple wants to get a divorce, and also about what happens to the kids (P2).

Without legal authority to back up what traditional authority they could (re-)establish in resettlement, their roles as agents of social control and their ability to resolve family problems were severely limited. As several participants described, their role was limited to "giving advice," evidenced in the following examples:

> When it comes to a family issue, a husband and wife, we can only talk to them to see if they want to go back together or how can we help them. But when it goes farther and it is related to the government, we don't have that opportunity with the wife and husband to go between them to make a decision" (P2).
>
> [If a family invited me to help], first, I would go and visit the family, talk to them, encourage them, and support them. If it didn't work, then I would have to let it go (P1).
>
> The women's group . . . we don't have power. Which means if we see domestic violence, we don't have any power to tell the family what to do. So, the only thing that we can do is counseling them and find them a resource (P3).
>
> Here [in Minnesota] the problem is—if we see someone being abused, we cannot get into their situation. The wife and husband, if they want it to be reported, they have to call themselves. For us [women leaders], we can only give advice (P3).

> Before it's getting higher or bigger, to the court, our power is just to go, talk to them, to make sure that the family understands each other. And if they don't accept our advice, they want to go further [and get a divorce or report it to the legal system], then we don't have the power. We can't mediate anymore (P2).

> We called 2–3 leaders and then we went over there and then we talked to the husband and told him, 'next time don't do that.' They listen to us if we go with the group [of community leaders] and talk to them. . . . But we just gave them a warning, we couldn't do anything. We just negotiated with them and taught them the rules and laws in the U.S. So the couple was okay later. If they didn't listen, then we just gave it to the American laws. We told them they had to go to the American rules. We told them if they didn't want their wife to call the police, then we could help them. But whatever they did, they would have to pay the consequence with the American laws (P4).

Furthermore, because Karen leaders were no longer connected to and backed up by legal authorities, participants feared that they could get into trouble with U.S. legal systems if they intervened in family problems without the family's permission (P1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8). They explained that they could only intervene in family problems if they were invited by the family to help. Two participants thought they could get in trouble for breaking "privacy laws" or could be sued by the family for intervening without their permission, because it involved "telling them what to do and taking their power" (P4). For example,

> Right now we learned from the system here [in the U.S.], too. So we don't just go and talk to a family. We only go if they call us. Because families have privacy too. So we don't want to disrupt their family. But in our back country if we heard about a family problem then we just went to visit. We talked to them. We didn't want that problem to become bigger. So we just stopped that problem. We had authority to do that over there. But here, you know, everybody has human rights! You can't do that! We hear families are having problems, and we want to help them, but if they don't call us, then we can't do anything. We don't want to get trouble for ourselves too. So we have to wait. If they call us, we will call the women leader or community leader who can help with family problems. We will

> have a meeting and then we will go and talk to them. But if they don't call us, we don't go. We can't do that. . . . So if they don't invite us and then we go, we will get sued!" (P4).

These quotes illustrate new tensions experienced in the United States between individual freedoms and community leaders' authority to act as social control agents. Finding new freedoms not available to them in the cultural and legal context in Burma or Thailand (e.g., alcohol use and infidelity are legal in the United States), some Karen people were no longer willing to recognize or submit to the traditional authority of Karen leaders or historical cultural norms. In effect, social hierarchies that bestowed traditional authority were leveled, as Karen people "were all refugees" in the United States. Cultural processes of intervention that involved "going into the family" and "telling them what to do," which were functional and acceptable for solving family problems in Burma and Thailand, were suddenly potentially illegal intrusions in the context of U.S. legal systems.

Challenges connecting to U.S. systems. That communities lose their previous legal authority when they resettle is not a novel finding. The more interesting finding that emerged from this study was related to the challenges that Karen women faced in connecting to U.S. legal and social service systems to regain access to authority to help their community. As defined previously in this paper, linking ties refers to connections with institutional and governmental organizations (Woolcock, 2001).

Overall, many participants felt like they had more power to help their community in Burma and Thailand because they were connected to broader systems of legal authority that were responsive to their community's needs. In resettlement, they were no longer able to connect to official legal or social service systems. As discussed in

Category 3, one reason for a lack of connections was that Karen women had not received adequate information or training to become knowledgeable about U.S. legal and social service systems and resources.

Participants also described that U.S. systems and resources were not accessible, and even when they were able to access them, services were often not helpful for Karen families or could even make family problems worse, as indicated by the following quotes:

> Sometimes families just think that even if they go and ask for help [from U.S. systems], nobody can help them, because the first, second, third time they tried, they didn't get help at all (P5).

> The type of help that [Karen families] need, it's not there. . . . We don't have any resources that are Karen. They are all American. . . . There are not many resources that we can refer them to that can help and will fit our culture and understand our community (P3).

Barriers to accessing culturally relevant, effective services included U.S. services lacking knowledge of Karen culture, not providing interpreters, not helping with system navigation, providing forms and paperwork only in English, and not providing psychoeducation or adequate context related to U.S. legal and social services. The following quotes illustrate the barriers women faced in accessing culturally relevant, effective services in resettlement:

> It was hard to communicate with [non-Karen child protective services workers], because they didn't understand the Karen culture. I tried to talk to them, tried to explain to them the family situation, but it seemed like they didn't understand and they didn't get it very well. . . . [Also,] I felt down when I talked to the worker . . . I felt sad, like they were looking down on me, maybe because I am not American (P10).

> [Karen families] don't want to go through all the processes, like the legal processes of going to court and waiting. Plus, when they receive the letter

> or call from the court, they are afraid and scared, because they don't know where to go (interpreter/cultural consultant).
>
> It's not easy to get into a shelter. They have a lot of process to go through before you can get in there. So it's not easy. And then they are very limited; there are only a few. And anytime I call, they are always full (P3).
>
> Sometimes the worker walked into the house . . . and they didn't have an interpreter. And the family didn't know how to communicate with them. The worker just reported it to the police and the police just came and took away the father. That's not right. I think if the family doesn't understand what the worker is talking about, that's a problem. The interpreter is the biggest thing (P10).
>
> Down there [in Burma and Thailand], even though you separated the husband and the kids, if the husband said, 'I changed, I want to go back,' they could easily get back together . . . Here it's not easy to reunite the couple. After you file a protection order, it's not easy, even if the couple wants to come back together, they cannot, because the husband could get in trouble . . . and the separation is too long, like two years (interpreter/cultural consultant).
>
> Professionals sit at school and learn everything from the books. They don't know the Karen culture. If you sit at a desk and learn or go to the field and learn, it's a little different. So if you don't ask [about the culture], if you only know what you learned in school, maybe your professional skills are not going to help Karen families" (P3).

Participants described U.S. services as fragmented and difficult to navigate, for example, "one problem is related to so many things . . . so you have to go and look and get help from or send them to so many resources" (P3). Furthermore, women did not have adequate assistance to navigate complex U.S. legal and social service systems, as this participant further described,

> The resources here always want you to go here, go there, go there, go there, go there, go there. But the real need of Karen women is not pointing like that. You need to assist them exactly where they're supposed to go (P3).

Being *ah-na* to ask for help at all, having to ask for help from multiple sources was even more difficult for Karen women. Furthermore, they were uncomfortable having to share their story over and over again in order to access various services. For example, one participant described that her client "had to repeat [her story] again and again, and it's really hard for her to repeat her story" (P5). Another participant explained that it is especially hard for people with mental illness "like depression and trauma" to talk to multiple providers about the problems they were experiencing (P10). My interpreter/cultural consultant added that Karen people experienced mental health assessments as "having to answer too many questions." She added, "[people who have depression] don't like it if you keep asking the same questions."

Another participant explained that some Karen families experienced getting multiple referrals as if their problems were being broadcast. She said, "it's like you are spreading out this family problem. So many groups know about this family problem. That family is shy about many people knowing their problems" (P3). She added, "one problem is related to so many things, which all have their own resources. So for one problem, many people know about that problem. And another problem is that our women still did not get a solution" (P3). This participant explained that when women leaders refer families to multiple resources, families feel like the leader is "gossiping" about them. She said,

> it's like you are gossiping about the family. When you are trying to help them, it's like you are bringing up the problem to other people . . . it's not like our traditional culture . . . the feeling that woman has is that they are ashamed of their self and their problem and that so many people know about it. It's like their problem is being broadcast as news. So they don't like it (P3).

In sum, many participants felt like they had more power to help their community in Burma and Thailand because they provided social services and were connected to broader systems of legal authority that were responsive to their community's needs. In resettlement, they were no longer able to connect to official legal or social service systems. Furthermore, they felt like even when they did connect to them, the systems were not responsive to their needs. In other words, in the United States they faced significant barriers to accessing this linking capital.

Findings are consistent with other research that has found a lack of bridging and linking ties between pioneer communities and broader power structures (Haines et al., 1981; Owusu, 2000; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Examples of successful linking ties in this study were limited to a few instances of developing close referral relationships with specific social and/or legal service agencies, such as domestic violence shelters (P8, 10). However, participants described that Karen women in the United States had largely lost their ability to partner with broader legal and social service systems to help Karen women and families resolve family problems. Figure 6 depicts the loss of authority that occurred during resettlement, including the loss of legal authority and the loss of traditional authority that was previously exercisable through interpersonal relationships.

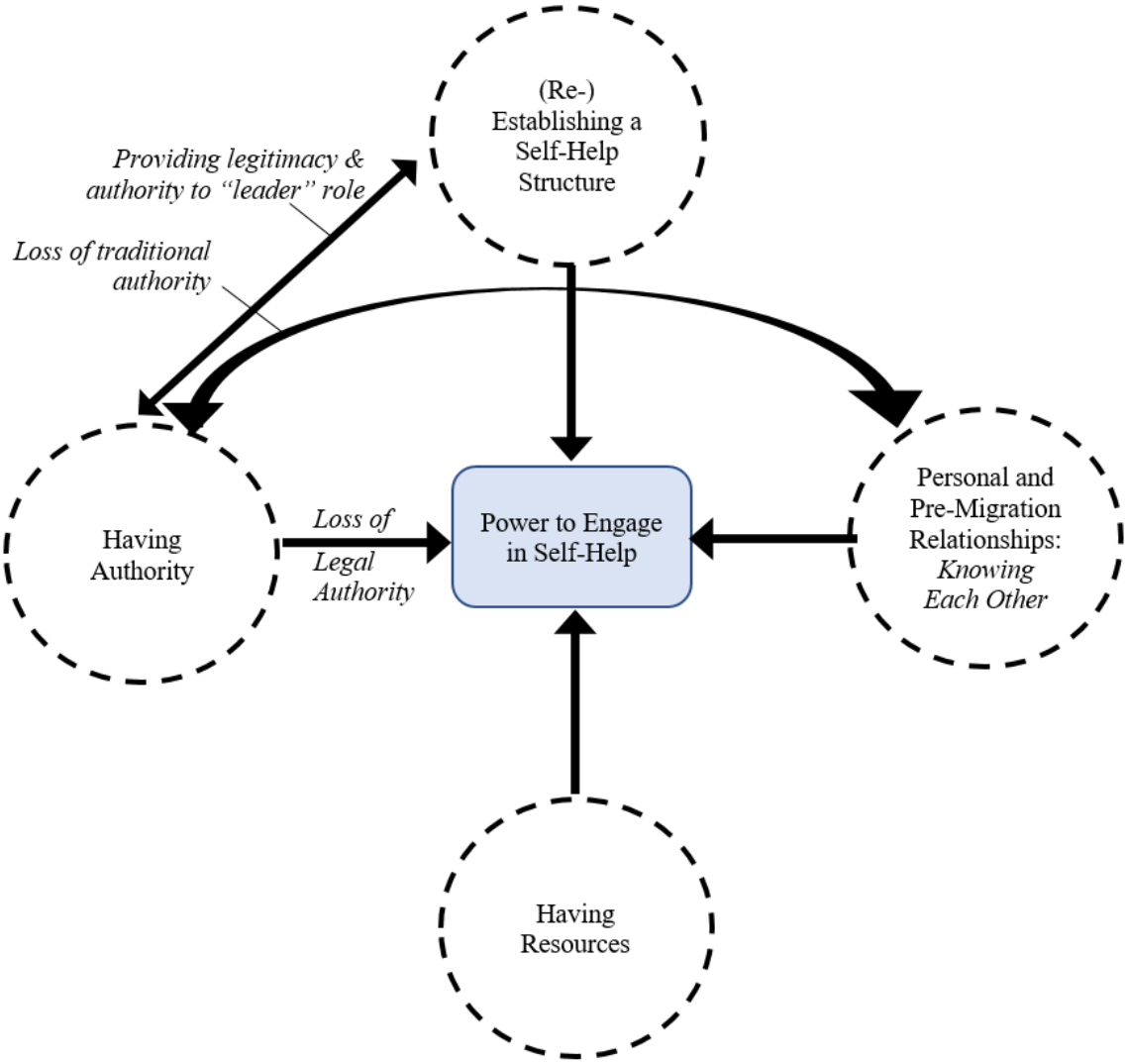

Figure 6. How loss of authority impacted power to engage in self-help.

Below, Figure 7 presents the final theory that emerged from this study, including all four categories that impacted women's power to engage in self-help in resettlement and the relationships between categories.

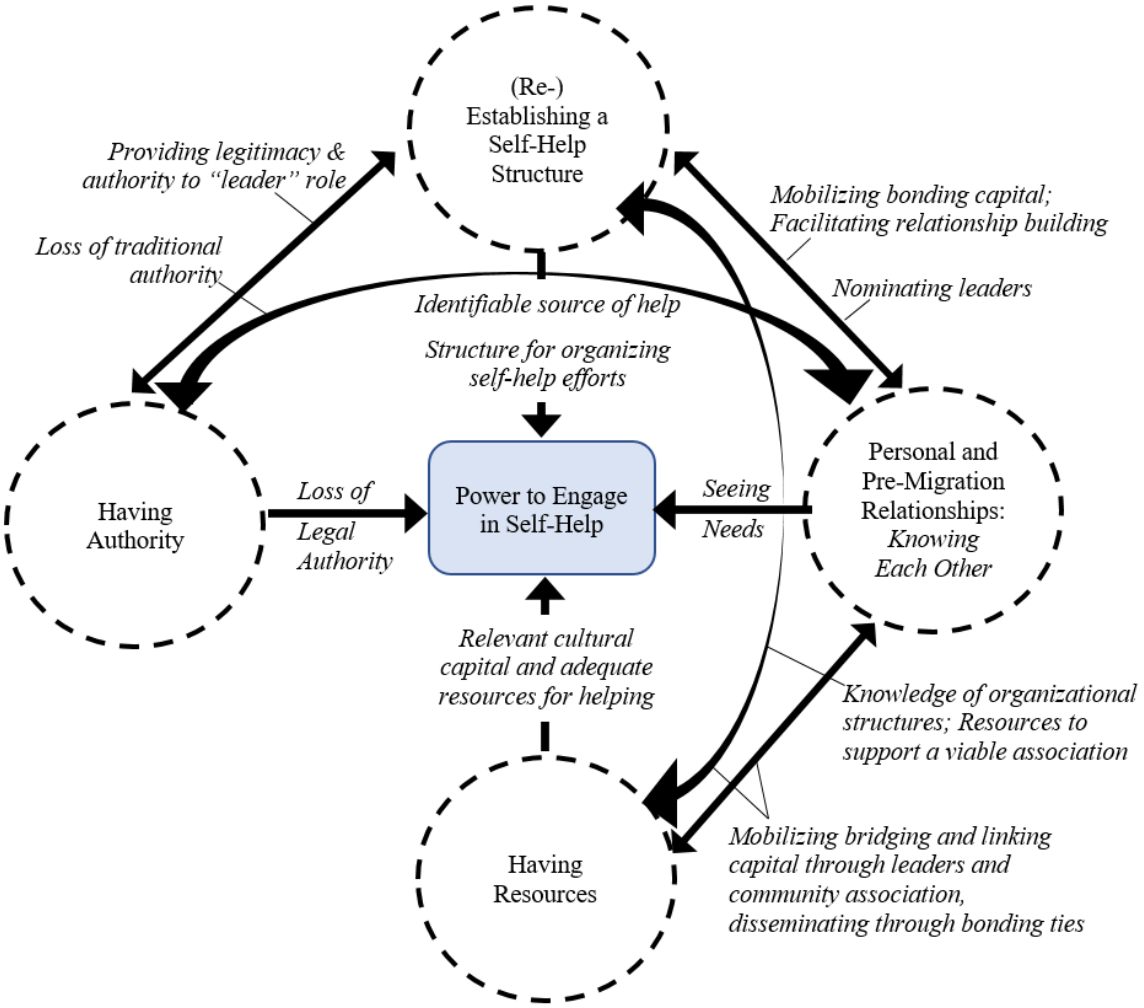

Figure 7. Final grounded theory of women's power to engage in self-help in resettlement.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study is notable in its examination of the experiences of 10 first-generation Karen women resettled to the United States and their experiences of power to engage in self-help in resettlement.

Though a small number of studies have documented how Karen women have organized to help each other in Burma and Thailand, none have considered how they utilized those skills, strategies, or structures in the context of resettlement. Findings from this study also fill gaps in existing literature by exploring how a new refugee-background community formed a community association, factors that impacted this process, and by providing a description of the structure of the association. Additionally, this study responds to a gap in the literature by defining community-identified resettlement outcomes, rather than utilizing predefined outcomes, such as integration and self-sufficiency (Majka & Mullan, 2002; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Finally, this study adds knowledge about the role voluntary associations play in the resettlement of pioneer groups that is largely unacknowledged in official resettlement rhetoric (Clarke, 2014).

Prior to beginning this research study, I was aware, from my practice and volunteer experience, that the Karen community in Minnesota was well organized. I was familiar with the structure and function of KCM. However, I was not familiar with what the KCM Women's Committee did. Furthermore, I was aware of the work of the Karen Women's Organization in Burma and Thailand, but I did not know how or to what extent

Karen women had continued their organizing work in the resettlement context. I engaged in this study to better understand the work that Karen women were involved with in resettlement. The research questions developed to guide this study were:

1. Why do Karen women organize in the Minnesota resettlement context?
2. What are their goals and purpose(s)?
3. What do they do/how do they organize to meet these goals?
4. What supports and constraints impact women's ability to organize in resettlement?

Findings revealed that Karen women were active in resettlement and had (re-)formed women's groups as part of broader community organizations, including KCM and Karen churches. Participants described that their primary purpose was to help others in their community. The specific type of help that they focused on had changed since the organization was founded from providing basic resettlement services to responding to family problems. However, their ability to help their community was significantly compromised by the resettlement process. Following grounded theory methods, this study became more narrowly focused on understanding Karen women's experiences of power conceptualized as agency and capacity to help their community.

Through a process of qualitative inquiry that drew on grounded theory and ethnographic methods, this study identified four overlapping and interrelated categories that affected Karen women's experiences of power to help each other in resettlement. To some extent, each of these categories can be found in existing literature. However, this study contributes knowledge about each category in a particular cultural context. Second,

it theorizes how these categories are related to each other and how they are related to the community-identified goal of being able to engage in self-help.

Organizing to Forge Power for Self-Help

Karen women organized in resettlement in order to be able to help other Karen women and families. However, most participants described feeling like they did not have adequate power or authority to help with many community needs in resettlement, most notably, with family problems. Furthermore, several participants reported feeling like they had more power and authority to respond to family problems in conflict and refugee camp settings in Burma and Thailand than they did in the United States.

Power was theorized in this study as agency or capacity to help their community, consist with feminist theories of *power as capacity* to act (Lloyd, 2013), "energy, capacity, and potential" (Hartsock, 1983, p. 210), or the ability to take collective action (Arendt, 1958, 1970). This view of power is related to the concept of agency, or "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Kabeer (1999) called one's *sense* of agency "the power within," and further described that "it refers to people's capacity to define their own life choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition from others" (p. 438). Contrary to conflict-based models of power, this view considers power unlimited, reproducible through collective empowerment, and exhibited in responsibility to the needs of the collective, reciprocity, and mutual support (Robnett, 1996).

However, women also described that having authority impacted their power. Descriptions in this category were consistent with conceptualizations of *power over* or

power as domination (Lloyd, 2013), or as *rational–legal power* (Weber, 1947). This type of power is exercised through institutions, laws, and bureaucracies. In feminist studies, power over is generally associated with hegemonic, masculine power and is associated with a conflict-based model that emphasizes aggression and manifests in patriarchy (Lloyd, 2013). This type of power is often considered nonbenign and, in fact, negative (Lloyd, 2013).

A few have raised questions about feminist critiques of this conceptualization of power. Yeatman (1997), writing from the perspective of political science, challenged feminist critiques of power over/power as domination for failing to distinguish between democratic and undemocratic types of domination. She argued, "domination can work democratically to extend or even constitute the powers of its subjects" (p. 145). Other feminist scholars have also argued for the potential benefit of accessing or utilizing power over to advance goals of feminist organizers (Bradshaw, Soifer, & Gutierrez, 1994; Mizrahi, 2007).

In this study, participants described having this type of power in some areas of Burma and Thailand where they were able to establish customary governance structures, and that it enabled them to more effectively respond to family problems, including protecting women from intimate partner violence. They also described that they lost this type of power in the process of resettling to a new sociopolitical context, and that it impacted their ability to solve family problems. Findings lend some support to the idea that power over/power as domination can be utilized to achieve feminist goals, such as protecting women from intimate partner violence.

Goals, Purpose(s), and Activities

The goals, purposes, and activities of KCM–WC described by participants in this study support several findings in existing literature, including that refugee voluntary associations are dynamic and evolving (Cederberg, 2012). Second, their specific purposes and activities are shaped by the broader resettlement environment (Cederberg, 2012). Specifically, they fill gaps in systems that are unprepared to serve new groups (Haines et al., 1981; Harkins, 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Smith, 2013; Swe & Ross, 2010).

According to Owusu (2000), refugee organizations often have more than one goal, function, or activity. Although the findings reported in this paper primarily discussed resettlement services and responding to family problems, participants also mentioned other activities, including developing a revolving loan fund, organizing community events to preserve and promote Karen culture and identity, and organizing support for family and community members still in Burma and Thailand. These are consistent with the multiple functions and types of activities of refugee voluntary associations that have been described in the literature (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Owusu, 2000; Worland & Darlington, 2010).

Second, the goals of KCM and KCM–WC were not static. Existing research suggests that the initial purposes of many refugee voluntary associations are broad and focused on meeting basic resettlement needs and become increasingly specialized with time (Borman, 1984; Owusu, 2000). Additionally, goals evolve in response to community needs, which are partially defined by the resources and supports that are available in the

broader resettlement environment (Olney, 1993; Owusu, 2000). Initially, KCM and KCM–WC efforts were directed at providing basic resettlement services, such as picking up new families at the airport, finding housing and employment, helping apply for public assistance, and providing basic needs items. However, as resettlement and other social and health services became more adept at providing culturally responsive services, for example, when resettlement agencies hired Karen case managers or when health and social service systems began utilizing professional Karen interpreters, their goals changed. At the time of study, KCM and KCM–WC was focused on responding to family problems, an area of need that was not being met by existing services.

This study adds to existing research documenting that U.S. systems and services have been ill prepared to meet the needs of new refugee-background groups upon their arrival (Haines et al., 1981; Harkins, 2012; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011; Salinas, Pritchard, & Kibedi, 1987; Smith, 2013; Swe & Ross, 2010). Findings support the role that refugee voluntary associations play in filling in system gaps, including connecting new arrivals to resettlement agencies and providing core services (Bailie, 2010; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013). Owusu (2000) argued that Ghanaian associations "may be seen as substituting for local agencies" (Owusu, 2000, p. 1176). Similarly, Elliott and Yusuf (2014) found that Somali community associations in New Zealand filled in gaps in the resettlement system, such as assisting members to access resources to which they were entitled, and that these services were "critical to the success of government programmes" (p. 108).

Unfortunately, the critical roles that refugee-background communities play in the provision of resettlement services are largely unrecognized and uncompensated (McCabe, 2010; Williams, 2006). For example, Williams (2006) found that voluntary associations were unwittingly taken advantage of by existing service providers who drew on these resources without adequate compensation by using unpaid, volunteer interpreters in the provision of their services. Participants in this study described contributing significant volunteer and financial resources to help their community, including serving as interpreters, providing transportation, and providing core resettlement services that are the responsibility of resettlement agencies (e.g., assistance applying for public assistance). Practice and policy implications of this finding are discussed later in this section.

Indicators and Outcomes of Social and Familial Capital

Participants in this study described volunteering significant amounts of time to help others in their community, to the point of neglecting their own wellbeing, for example, by regularly foregoing sleep to take people to appointments or by sacrificing time with their own families. In general, findings demonstrate a high degree of rich potential bonding social capital, defined as social cohesion and norms of trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1998; Putnam, 1995, 2000). A few other studies conducted with Karen people in resettlement have also identified a strong communal orientation and sense of moral responsibility to help one another, which has also been described as bonding social capital (Bird et al., 2012; Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015; Suter & Magnusson, 2015; Worland, 2015). For example, Suter and Magnusson (2015) described Karen

people with refugee backgrounds in Sweden as “a group with strong bonding ties on local, national and transnational levels” (p. 99). Worland’s (2015) findings also exemplified the collectivist nature of Karen society, their strong sense of community and willingness to share resources, and interdependent and communal nature of their sense of wellbeing.

Furthermore, participants described feeling responsible for helping Karen women and families *as if* they were blood relatives, even if they had never met them before, indicating a high degree of familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Worland (2015) also found that Karen people felt kinship connections to each other regardless of actual blood relationships, and that families who had been in Australia longer took responsibility for helping newer arrivals. Familial capital is a potentially rich resource for new refugee-background communities. Additionally, it is potentially useful for extending analysis beyond social network and social capital theory, which focus on specific, established relational ties. Defined as “cultural knowledge,” that carries “a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79), familial capital may be a good fit for research with refugee-background communities, whose networks are often characterized by spontaneous connections that are dynamic and evolving (Ryan et al., 2008).

In short, all women in this study described a strong motivation to help their community, but also many challenges to being able to do so effectively. Participants in research with other refugee-background groups have also described barriers to being able to help their community, often with a sense of sadness and loss (McMichael &

Manderson, 2004; Shelley, 2001). These findings point to an important distinction made by some social capital theorists between *potential* capacity of bonding capital and *actual* mobilization or use of social capital to achieve an outcome (Lin, 2008). Study findings support critiques of Coleman (1998) and Putnam's (1995, 2000) definitions of social capital that limit the concept to social cohesion or norms of trust and reciprocity, or potential capacity (Anthias, 2007; Portes, 1997; Ryan, 2011). Similarly, they emphasize the importance of going beyond descriptions of networks and social cohesion to examine factors that impact communities' use of social capital to achieve certain ends (Anthias, 2007; Portes, 1997; Ryan, 2011). As Shelley (2001) has argued, "The desire for community and the *means* to effect community must be brought together" (p. 491).

A main contribution of this study is its identification of factors that mediated between the potential for social capital and participants' ability to turn this into actual resources to meet their goals. These factors and how they are related to findings in the extant literature are discussed below. Furthermore, this study contributes knowledge about resource mobilization to achieve community-identified outcomes. As such, it goes beyond most existing research that focuses on use of social capital for integration or economic self-sufficiency outcomes, which represent the priorities of resettlement officials (Cederberg, 2012; Strang & Ager, 2010). Study findings also support critiques of dichotomized distinctions between bonding and bridging capital and suggest a complex, dynamic relationship between the two (Fernandez & Nichols, 2002; Patulny & Svendsen, 2007).

Literature on women's organizing is also relevant in relation to women's goals for organizing. Consistent with literature on women's ways of organizing, participants in this study described that their drive to help their community grew out of their own experiences of oppression and struggles in resettlement, their shared identity as a persecuted people, and a sense of moral responsibility to help each other which often stemmed from religious beliefs. In contrast to traditional male-centered organizing models, which emphasize that involvement in organizing is motivated by rational self-interest (McCourt, 1977), abundant research on women's organizing has illuminated the intersections between organizing, identity, personal experience, and emotion in women's organizing (Abrahams, 1996; Ferree & Merrill, 2000; Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante, & Steffy, 2000; Naples, 1998; Pardo, 1991; Ray & Korteweg, 1999). For example, according to Hyde (2004), "Emotions link people to a cause, help them assume risk, and sustain constituencies through difficult times" (p. 7). Participants' involvement in organizing to help their community in this study were consistent with these characteristics of women's organizing in the broader literature.

Factors That Impacted Women's Power to Help Each Other

(Re)establishing a Self-Help Structure

Extensive research has documented that migrant groups establish organizations postmigration (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lloyd, 2013; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013; Wijers, 2013), although few studies have focused on associations, pioneer communities, or women (Piacentini, 2012). This study's description of the processes through which a pioneer community (re-)established a voluntary

association in resettlement makes several contributions to the literature. First, most existing research on refugee voluntary associations and community organizations has described their function, and not their structure (Olney, 1993). Second, most existing research has focused on already established associations or organizations and has not paid adequate attention to the processes through which these structures were formed (Ryan, 2011). Lastly, only a few studies adopted historical perspectives to understand how refugee voluntary associations represented historical social and self-help structures; even fewer on how communities adapted these structures for use in resettlement (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). This study contributes to existing literature by adding knowledge about the structure of KCM and KCM–WC and the processes through which Karen women and other community leaders adapted customary governance systems from Burma and Thailand for use in their resettlement context.

Establishing voluntary associations has been identified as one way that refugee-background communities develop and use social capital (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015; McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013). Corroborating existing literature, KCM and KCM–WC advanced goals of unity, shared survival, and shared prosperity (Shelley, 2001), facilitated relational connections or the formation of bonding ties among community members (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015), and enabled communities to utilize “highly structured, well-organized” sociocultural systems for self-help, such as community banking systems (Smith, 2013). Their role was critical in the early resettlement period (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015;

Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013). This study also adds far more detailed knowledge about why KCM and KCM–WC structures were important for electing leaders, recruiting volunteers, organizing activities, dividing and delegating responsibilities, and facilitating collective identification of community needs and collective problem solving. In other words, it contributes knowledge about how formation of a community association enabled them to mobilize potential bonding capital in systematic ways to help their community in resettlement.

At the same time, given the lack of research with this population, it is not known the extent to which the experiences of this group in Minnesota may be unique. Minnesota has a large number of mutual assistance associations compared to other states, which may also indicate that Minnesota may be a unique resettlement environment (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2012). Scholars have cautioned against taking networks for granted without considering how they are formed and maintained, or factors that may prevent their formation (Bourdieu, 1986; Ryan, 2011). In practice, researchers and practitioners have too often take for granted that refugee background groups have access to supportive networks, without considering contextual and structural factors related to displacement and resettlement that impact these communities' ability to make bonds, bridges, and links (Fine, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Wierzbicki, 2004). This is problematic because studies have found that refugee-background communities' ability to utilize existing resources and self-help systems are significantly compromised in the process of resettlement (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Smith, 2013).

Participants in this study explained that Karen communities in many other locations were not able to form community associations. They described various factors that impacted the ability to (re-)form and utilize an association to promote self-help, corroborating studies that have identified the importance of having time (Shelley, 2001; Smith, 2013), geographic proximity or access to transportation (Owusu, 2000; Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984; Shelley, 2001; Suter & Magnusson, 2015), financial resources (McMichael & Manderson, 2004; Menjivar, 2000; Smith, 2013), and having leaders with premigration knowledge of historical sociocultural structures (Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Bourdieu (1986) also recognized that developing social networks required time and effort, and that time influenced people's ability to participate in networks. Lastly, participants in this study explained that the authority of historically based social structures was compromised in resettlement due to a loss of legal authority (Category 4) and a loss of personal and premigration relationships, which impacted their ability to identify and nominate leaders with relevant experience (Category 2). More research is needed with Karen communities in other states to further examine these and other factors affecting associational formation, in particular, the barriers to associational formation.

Personal and Premigration Relationships: Knowing Each Other

It is well accepted that bonding ties, most commonly defined as relationships between coethnics (Ryan, 2011), provide critical supports for new refugees, especially in their early resettlement (Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Lacroix et al., 2015; Owusu, 2000; Smith, 2013). However, several factors also obstructed women's ability to utilize bonding networks to help one another. This finding supports the argument that the existence (or

absence) of network ties does not necessarily indicate levels of social capital (Anthias, 2007; Menjivar, 2000; Portes, 1997; Ryan, 2007). Findings in this category also add to studies that challenge Coleman's (1998) and Putnam's (1995, 2000) conceptualizations of social capital as social cohesion or norms of trust and reciprocity (Smith, 2013).

In this study, women described several factors that impacted their ability to utilize potential bonding capital, including geographic proximity, access to transportation, and having time to build relationships. Barriers to being able to help each other were also related to not having personal or premigration relationships through which they could *see needs* and proactively offer assistance. Without this capability, leaders were often unable to help, since community members were *ah-na,* or hesitant to ask for help. These findings captured cultural dynamics of help-seeking and help-giving that partially determined women's ability to utilize bonding ties to help each other. A classic example from this dissertation is the woman who regularly attended church but did not know how to ask for help for her family problems, and therefore did not get help until the situation reached crisis (P6).

Shelley (2001) described a similar cultural dynamic in the Vietnamese community in Milwaukee. He found that Vietnamese people were also hesitant to ask for help, which was related to the cultural dynamic of 'saving face.' He described this behavior as functional in the context of other values and behaviors in Vietnam. However, in the context of resettlement, it was no longer functional, and prevented the community from being able to help with problems.

These findings highlight the importance of understanding the cultural context within which relational networks are formed and utilized. Second, they suggest the importance of adopting a historical perspective to understand additional ways that resettlement impacts a community's ability to utilize their social capital by introducing a new sociocultural context (Cederberg, 2012). This knowledge is important for social workers, who, by understanding relational networks in their cultural context, may be able to play a role in assisting new communities to adapt the self-help structures and processes they utilized in the premigration context for use in resettlement.

Additionally, personal and premigration relationships as well as culturally specific relational dynamics were relevant to the formation and success of the community association and therefore to the community's ability to help each other. Because "no one nominated themselves," knowledge and skills that were present in the community could remain unknown and underutilized if community members were not able to identify others' premigration knowledge and experiences and invite them into leadership roles. This is one of several findings that support the importance of assessing the nature, quality, and value of relationships within their specific cultural context (Cederberg, 2012).

Having Resources

Many different types of resources were described in this study and have been described in the broader literature. Having resources (knowledge, time, transportation, and financial resources) was related to all other categories in the theory that emerged from this study.

Knowledge of U.S. systems and resources: "Knowing the system here." Knowledge that is specifically relevant to the resettlement context, captured in the category *Knowing the System Here*, represents a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This study found that Karen women generally possessed low levels of cultural capital, which is consistent with extant literature about Karen and other pioneer refugee groups (Haines et al., 1981; Owusu, 2000; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). Furthermore, a lack of cultural capital, including English language fluency, also created barriers to forming bridging ties to obtain this knowledge, consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that a certain degree of cultural capital is necessary to develop bridging capital.

While cultural capital is generally described as being accessible through bridging ties, a few studies have also suggested that community leaders may be able to access bridging capital through bonding networks (Bailie, 2010; Cederberg, 2012; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014; Granovetter, 1983; Lacroix et al., 2015; Suter & Magnusson, 2015). This study corroborates this research. It found that participants who had knowledge about existing U.S. systems and services, specifically about domestic violence laws and resources (P8, 10), were planning to share their knowledge with KCM–WC leaders. One participant said she planned to do training with KCM–WC about domestic violence resources, saying, "As I know and do, I would like them to know how to do, too" (P10). This quote is an example of how bonding capital was used to compensate for other community members' lack of cultural capital and bridging capital. Information sharing, particularly about resettlement services and resources, has been identified as an important role of refugee-background associations and bonding ties (McMichael & Manderson,

2004). This finding also further supports that an overlapping, nuanced relationship exists between bonding and bridging capital (Ryan, 2011).

The concept of integration is also relevant here. It is well established in academic literature that integration is a dynamic, two-way process that involves people with refugee backgrounds adapting to their new society and existing institutions adapting to new communities and also creating the conditions that enable integration (Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2002; Strang & Ager, 2010). While it has been recognized that established networks in the broader resettlement context may be exclusionary and create barriers that prevent access to newcomers (Reimer, Lyons, Ferguson, & Polanco, 2008), most existing research continues to focus on the processes by which refugee-background communities adapt. This study described several systemic and structural barriers that impacted women's ability to connect to existing institutions.

Although not explicitly the purpose of this study, findings contribute to a small but growing body of literature about the integration process from the perspectives of people with refugee backgrounds, which indicate that existing systems have been slow to adapt to new communities (Lewis, 2010; McPherson, 2010). Participants described that resettlement services were initially unprepared to serve their community. At the time of this study, existing services related to family problems did not adequately or effectively serve their community, including police and 9-1-1, domestic violence shelters, child protective services, and adult and adolescent substance use treatment centers. Several implications of this finding for social work practitioners are discussed below.

Financial resources. Although only a few responses in this dissertation were related to financial resources and funding sources, they offer some support for two findings from the literature. First, they support the notion that refugee voluntary associations may be hesitant to accept government or outside funding because of how it limits their ability to be self-regulating and governing (Borman, 1984). For example, Griffiths et al. (2005) found that government support of refugee community organizations created role confusion and tensions between being agents of the state and representing the best interests of their community. Additionally, they found that refugee-background communities continued to maintain informal networks in addition to forming refugee community organizations in order to remain responsive to community needs that were outside the scope of government funding.

Second, this study supports research findings that a lack of resources impacts a community's capacity for to utilize sociocultural systems of self-help and mutual aid. For example, Smith (2013) found that in both Kenya and the United States, Somali Bantu families had too few resources to be able to share, which inhibited their ability to help each other despite strong potential bonding capital. A lack of resources also inhibited their ability to use self-help structures, such as highly organized and structured community banking systems whereby individuals could contribute to a shared pool monthly and draw from the pool in an emergency. McMichael and Manderson (2004) also found that poverty resulted in Somali community members in Australia having inadequate resources to share, to the extent that the "ethic of exchange and redistribution [had] been lost" (p. 94).

Having Authority

Participants described losing legal, traditional, and moral authority upon resettling to the United States, which diminished their power to respond to family problems. Responses indicated that they have not been able to access systems of authority in their new setting and may need help forging these connections. For example, most participants did not know how to access domestic violence shelters or legal protections for women who were being abused and were unfamiliar with U.S. laws or law enforcement systems. In the language of social capital, Karen women faced significant barriers in developing linking ties and linking capital. The finding that women had more power to help resolve family problems when they had access to legal authority in Burma and Thailand also adds to feminist organizing literature, as noted above, by supporting Yeatman's (1997) assertion that power over can be utilized to achieve feminist goals, such as protecting women who were being abused, and may not always be inherently negative.

Interestingly, a few studies have identified ways that refugee-background communities have preserved judicial functions among community organizations in resettlement. One study described how Ghanaian organizations in Toronto were able to (re-)establish power and authority to play a "vital judicial function" that involved resolving personal, marital, and family disputes in the community that would have otherwise resulted in legal court and/or criminal cases (Owusu, 2000). Ghanaian organizations blended traditional customary and social practices with legal and social norms in Canada to achieve this authority. McMichael and Manderson (2004) also identified the existence of "Somali courts" or indigenous interpersonal dispute resolution

systems, in Melbourne, Australia. Although these authors did not discuss *how* these communities successfully re-established a degree of rational–legal and traditional authority in resettlement, it is noteworthy that processes exist through which it was possible. Knowledge and experiences from these other communities could be useful in developing trainings or interventions to assist Karen women in (re-)gaining a judicial function in their community to resolve family problems.

This study primarily explored authority as something that women did or did not possess. It also explored how loss of authority impacted their power to help each other. However, there are deeper dimensions to this category that would have required much deeper levels of reflection by participants and were not able to be explored in this dissertation. For example, authority is also related to identity, particularly the identity of being a woman leader, it also stems from moral obligations to help one another, and it is emotionally experienced. One participant did talk in an interview about how she experienced tension related to loss of authority that impacted her identity of being a woman leader. For example, she said,

> I have a lot of women call me in the middle of the night. They cry. I feel sad that I cannot help them. And especially with domestic. With those things, it's like, I don't want to hear much . . . I feel so tired about that . . . It's like, even though I know I'm a leader, they depend on me . . . but I can't stand for them. I'm not a helpful person (P3).

Future research is needed to more fully explore the relationships between identity, role, and experiences of authority for Karen women leaders in resettlement in order to develop a more complex understanding of this category and how it is related to having power to engage in self-help in resettlement.

Community Size

Although it did not emerge as a major category, this study did find that KCM and KCM–WC were formed when the community was approximately 20 families, which somewhat contradicts the notion in existing literature that a "critical mass" or certain minimal number of community members are needed to form a community association (Zetter & Pearl, 2000). It suggests that other factors may be more significant, such as geographic proximity (Owusu, 2000; Rynearson & DeVoe, 1984; Shelley, 2001; Suter & Magnusson, 2015), as early Karen leaders in Minnesota all lived in the same apartment building. However, community size was significant in the association's formation because, while they were formed when the community was small, KCM and KCM–WC leaders anticipated that a large wave of arrivals would come in the future, and they formed the association to prepare for these arrivals.

Limitations

The findings of this exploratory study are intended to offer a rich description of first generation Karen women's experiences of power to help each other in one resettlement location and the factors that impacted their agency and capacity for self-help. Prior to discussing implications, it is important to note the limitations that were present in this study. While the sample was diverse in terms of age, time in the United States, English language fluency, inclusion of women who were active in different types of women's associations (KCM–WG and Karen women's groups in churches), and inclusion of women who felt like they did and did not have power to help their community in resettlement, the sample size was small.

Selection bias may be an additional limitation of this study. Cultural consultants and purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify participants. All of the Karen women in this study were Christian, which is reflective of the broader community in St. Paul. However, there is also a small Buddhist Karen population in St. Paul, who were not included in this study. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Karen women in Minnesota or other Karen communities.

Additionally, this study took place in one location, which, as previously noted, may be a unique case. Because it was conducted in a location where Karen people successfully formed a community association, factors that inhibit formation of voluntary associations were not fully explored. Again, findings may not be applicable to other Karen women in other locations.

This study also did not explore the nature of intragroup conflict or diversity within this community, which introduces the risk of perpetuating fictive idealizations of community solidarity and unity. Second, not addressing complexity and diversity within this 'community,' there is a danger of being reductionist and essentializing the diverse experiences of a diverse group. This limitation is notable, because scholars have pointed out that ethnic networks can have both positive and negative consequences for community members and can have exclusionary features (Cederberg, 2012; Portes, 1998). Future research should be conducted using comparative approaches and including Karen communities that did not form associations, to incorporate Buddhist and Animist Karen participants and other diverse demographics in study samples, and to ask about intragroup conflict, specifically.

Conducting cross-cultural research also introduced limitations, including the use of an interpreter. Given my previous experiences interviewing Karen people, I was also concerned about what participants were *not* telling me in interviews. However, I felt confident gently nudging or challenging participants when I perceived they were holding back. Additionally, I was involved with the formation of KCM, so I could draw on personal experience to provide context and inform data collection.

Lastly, I found it difficult to engage participants in reflecting on their experiences. Most were not familiar with Western interview processes, and I had to ask many follow up and clarifying questions to elicit the level of detail I needed. Even then, it was still difficult. My cultural consultant, one participant, and my previous experience interviewing Karen people had taught that participants would at some point begin to feel uncomfortable with "being asked too many questions." As a result, data collection and analysis lacked a certain level of depth and complexity, particularly the category of *Having Authority*.

Implications

The original purpose of this study was to explore and understand Karen women's organizing. What emerged was a theory of power defined as agency and capacity to help each other in resettlement. Findings discussed overlapping factors that impacted women's power to engage in self-help, which were related to cultural dynamics, community characteristics, historical and resettlement experiences, and political and bureaucratic structures and policies. The study fills gaps in the literature by examining how first-generation women from a pioneer refugee-background community adapted and utilized

historically based systems, structures, and processes of self-help in the context of resettlement. It also provides knowledge about how women utilized these systems, structures, and processes of self-help to achieve community-identified resettlement outcomes. Finally, it identifies structural and systemic barriers that Karen women faced in being able help each other in resettlement. This study adds knowledge about the role refugee voluntary associations play in the resettlement of pioneer groups that is largely unacknowledged in official resettlement rhetoric, programming, and policies (Clarke, 2014; Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). As such, findings inform several practice, policy, and research implications for social workers, refugee resettlement professionals, and other providers and systems that work with refugee-background communities.

Practice and Policy Implications

Current resettlement programs and policies have been described as systematically exclusionary and disempowering of refugee-background communities (Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2006; Valtonen, 2010). These policies are supported by a deficit discourse, which characterizes refugees as helpless and dependent and emphasizes the limitations and challenges refugee-background communities face, such as their lack of resettlement-specific language, education, or employment skills (Baffoe, 2013; Mazur, 1988; Zetter, 2007). Based on a narrow and deficit-based definition of ‘refugee,’ resettlement services have primarily been developed as one-size-fits-all approaches that emphasize the role of professional resettlement agencies (Baffoe, 2013).

Findings from this study revealed that KCM and KCM–WC were active in their own resettlement, mobilized significant strengths and resources to promote self-help, and

played critical roles in achieving successful resettlement outcomes for their community. Additionally, establishing a community association in part mediated the lack of cultural capital possessed by many Karen women by was important for establishing bridging and linking ties on behalf of the whole community and distributing knowledge and other resources through bonding networks. Acknowledging the active and primary role that a pioneer refugee-background community plays in their own resettlement has implications for practitioners, researchers, and for entire U.S. approach to resettling refugee-background communities.

Update deficit discourse. Study findings support recent scholars' critiques of the overuse of the term *refugee* for portraying 'refugeeness' as an all-encompassing, homogeneous identity associated with a deficit discourse, which serves to legitimize the need for and emphasis on outside interventions (Ford, 2012; Malkki, 1996; Zetter, 1991, 2007; Ziai, 2007). They suggest that current discourse that characterizes most policy, practice, and research with refugee-background communities be updated to language that recognizes the agency of refugee-background communities. For example, terms like *people with refugee backgrounds* have been proposed as alternatives, which suggest that the experiences of being a refugee can be a strength (Ford, 2012). This study's findings lend further support for updating existing, deficit discourse.

Incorporate knowledge about existing self-help networks and systems into resettlement planning for new groups. Findings from this study support current recommendations for more planning and preparation for the arrival of new groups, including developing in-depth understanding of new communities' traditional social

support systems and cultural dynamics of self-help (Smith, 2013). In order to support the ability of new communities to (re)-develop self-help structures in resettlement and maximize use of the strengths and resources of community members, information is needed prior to the resettlement of new groups about these structures and resources, and how the resettlement system can support their adaptation and utilization in resettlement.

Tools may need to be developed to assist with identifying and assessing existing community networks, self-help systems and dynamics, and other strengths and resources that refugee-background communities possess that can be incorporated into planning for the resettlement of large groups. Findings from this study suggest several areas for information gathering and assessment, including about historical self-help structures, cultural dynamics of helping, trust and reciprocity norms, level of exposure to and knowledge of U.S. systems, relevant premigration professional experience of community members (such as teachers or medics), and community-identified resettlement goals. Lastly, findings from this study also suggest the value of utilizing ethnographic methods in cross-cultural assessment.

Revise geographic placement policies to support (re-)building self-help structures. In order to support refugee-background communities' ability to utilize existing networks and resources in resettlement, geographic placement policies must be revised to incorporate this information, collected prior to the arrival of new groups. Currently, geographic placement policy decisions are made by resettlement agencies, who are expected to consult with state and local stakeholders, but not refugee-background communities themselves in determining placement of refugee arrivals each

year (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2012). Overall, these placement policies minimally consider and primarily disrupt existing social networks and supports (Shelley, 2001). Furthermore, as this study and others have found, geographic dispersal policies inhibited the formation of refugee associations in many locations (Smith, 2013).

A few scholars have suggested models for geographic placement policies that could support, rather than deplete, the social networks and social capital of new communities during resettlement. Westermeyer (2011) suggested replacing the current "broadcast" strategy for geographic placement with a "cluster" resettlement strategy. He cited a recent case study of 2 groups from Laos, 1 who was resettled through the normal geographic dispersal method and 1 who was placed with a cluster resettlement strategy in the State of Iowa. In the Iowa cluster resettlement, both refugees and local receiving communities played important roles in relocation decisions, and consideration was given for the skills, interests, and family organization of the refugee community. Westermeyer (2011) cited numerous positive outcomes for the cluster resettlement group, including quicker acculturation rates; better employment outcomes; less secondary out-migration; reduced youth involvement in gangs; reduced incarceration, violence and mental–emotional–behavioral disorders; and reduced costs of social services, welfare, criminal justice, and mental health services.

Another case study also supported increased planning for refugee movements and inclusion of existing support networks in placement decisions. In 1999, 8,000 Kosovar refugees who were airlifted to Canada with unprecedented consideration for maintaining extended family networks in geographic placement decisions (Lamba & Krahn, 2003). In

studying this group, Abu-Laban, Derwing, Mulder, & Northcott (2011) found that members of this group reported comparatively high levels of wellbeing and mental health. These findings suggest that more informed placement policies could also result in improved wellbeing for refugee-background families and potentially a decrease in family problems.

An issue closely related to geographic placement policies is preparation of local communities for resettlement of new groups. Again, resettlement agencies are primarily responsible for consulting with state and local stakeholders regarding proposed arrivals each year. However, a 2012 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that few resettlement agencies were adequately consulting relevant local stakeholders prior to proposing numbers and groups to be resettled in their area. The report also identified that resettlement agencies may prioritize their own agency capacity over the local community's capacity in making placement decisions (George, 2002; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012). As a result, consistent with findings from this paper, local health and social service providers reported a lack of knowledge about newly arriving groups or their specific health or resettlement needs, and that families were sometimes resettled in areas where there were no interpreters or residents who spoke their language (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

Overall, in order to create more informed geographic placement policies that consider a broader range of factors, including existing social networks of refugee-background communities and the resources and needs of resettlement agencies, state and local stakeholders, and also refugee-background communities themselves, federal

resettlement authorities may need to take a more active role in the geographic placement process. This includes working with stakeholders to determine appropriate geographic placement of new groups and ensuring adequate preparation of local systems. It would also involve ensuring refugee-background groups are involved in the planning for their own resettlement, which is discussed next.

Include refugee-background groups in resettlement planning and service delivery. Participants in this study described engaging in all aspects of refugee resettlement. They provided crucial resources to their own community as well as providing linguistic and cultural capital to government and mainstream organizations who were unable to serve this community in accessible, effective, culturally relevant ways. However, this study and others have found that refugee voluntary associations are often utilized by existing resources in the provision of their services without recognition or compensation (Williams, 2006). These findings suggest ethical and practical reasons for including refugee-background communities in official planning for their own resettlement and service delivery to their community.

This recommendation is consistent with calls from practitioners and researchers for the U.S. resettlement program to collaborate more with resettling communities in the design and implementation of plans for their own resettlement, to recognize their experiences and knowledge, and to include them in resettlement policy decision-making (Borman, 1984; Smith, 2013). Borman (1984) defined the current U.S. resettlement program as an “agency-dominated model” and argued for shifting to models that focus on strengthening “natural helping networks” (p. 61). Similarly, scholars have called for

empowerment and strengths-based approaches to refugee resettlement. Using language of power, Rowlands (1995) described a strengths-based approach to resettlement as “power to” or “power with” refugee communities, rather than “power over” their resettlement. A strengths-based approach to resettlement would identify and build on refugee-background communities’ experiences, knowledge, skills, strengths, resilience, courage, and determination (Chile, Elliot, Liev, & Tito, 2007). It would also recognize the value of a community’s systems, structures, and processes of self-help for meeting official and community-identified resettlement outcomes.

To incorporate refugee-background communities in resettlement planning and service delivery, innovative models of partnerships are needed. One example of a model that could be further implemented and tested is the Cambodian Cluster Project, a pilot project from the 1980s. This project involved significant advanced planning for the arrival of a new group, intentional and informed geographic placement of community members, and a collaborative resettlement model between a Cambodian mutual assistance association and a voluntary agency (Coleman, 1983). In particular, models are needed that recognize and build the capacity of refugee-background communities to utilize their existing skills, resources, and self-help systems, and that emphasize adaptation of existing services to be more culturally responsive to new groups. Models should also be informed by principles of mutual learning and effective cross-cultural collaboration.

These recommendations also have implications for the distribution of resettlement funding. Again, recognizing the critical role that refugee-background communities play

in resettlement offers ethical and practical justification for providing funding to support their role and services. Knowledge from this and other studies can be used to support advocacy efforts for systems change toward more both more collaborative models and increased resources to support refugee-background being included as partners in the resettlement system.

Provide more knowledge and orientation to new communities. Not having adequate knowledge or orientation to U.S. legal and social service systems presented a barrier to Karen women being able to help others access and navigate services, especially related to family problems. It also inhibited women's ability to build relationships with these systems. These findings suggest that U.S. resettlement systems have done an insufficient job preparing people with knowledge about laws and services that new communities are likely to come into contact with, including law enforcement and child protective services (CPS). As Worland (2010) noted, social problems, including domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health problems, and suicide were already increasing in the refugee camps in Thailand. Resettlement is also known to pose risk factors for the development of these social problems (Khawaja & Milner, 2012).

These issues are known to impact all communities. However, refugee-background communities often come from settings where the norms, laws, and services are different than in the United States. As such, culturally tailored education about U.S. norms, laws, and systems related to family problems should be developed. This education could be delivered as part of cultural orientation prior to arrival to the United States. Additionally, once new communities arrive, additional information should be provided, and groups

should be assisted to build actual referral linkages to these systems. Education materials should be developed in partnership with refugee-background communities to ensure they are culturally relevant.

Adapt existing systems to be more accessible and culturally relevant and develop innovative models of collaboration. In addition to having inadequate knowledge about U.S. systems, participants described being unable to connect to existing U.S. legal and social service systems, in particular, to help resolve family problems. They also described existing systems as inaccessible, ineffective, and not responsive to the needs of their community. Social workers can play important roles in helping Karen women connect to existing systems, particularly to resources for solving family problems. Social workers could also work with new refugee-background communities to adapt these services to be more accessible and culturally responsive. For example, participants described wanting more comprehensive, wraparound services and services that were family centered rather than only serving individual client systems. They also wanted services that utilized Karen staff. One participant gave an example of an existing program that she identified as culturally responsive. She said of this substance use treatment program,

> Right now in [the program], they help one person, but their goal is not just to help the one who is drinking. They are helping not one person, but the whole family. They also help the environment. So if we have that type of community system, I think the family will come looking for more help because this is the system we've been using in our old country, this is our system from back home. So I think that would be helpful" (P3).

Furthermore, social workers could partner with Karen women's organizations in creating innovative models for providing domestic violence and child protection services

that integrate culturally specific knowledge, strategies, and resources for solving family problems to enhance existing programming. Two participants described ideas for how Karen community leaders could partner with U.S. systems to help families experiencing family problems, including using historically utilized interventions as a first response to try to resolve problems before they escalated to involvement in the legal system. For example, they wanted to provide support to families to "build them up," provide family mediation, and provide education about U.S. norms, laws, and consequences. They felt that many Karen families became involved with the legal system because they lacked education about U.S. laws and norms or lacked access to support they needed. Both of these situations can be seen as system failures, and these participants wanted the opportunity to provide this knowledge and support to families before legal consequences exacerbated their problems (and, they noted, still did not result in helping families access the support they needed). In the following quotes, one of these participants explained the diversionary role she wanted KCM and the KCM–WC to play:

> The role I want is, let our community and trust our community to build up families to be healthy. I want the legal [system] to allow us to have more time to help with our own culture and system, for us to communicate with the family and make sure that both sides agree, and make sure that the culture [behavior and beliefs] is not in conflict with the legal system here (P3).

> If possible, if KCM had authority to do something to help our community, if we had the opportunity, we would like to hook ourselves up to any legal system that can help, and that legal system would listen to our leaders. If we could be that kind of bridge, I think it would help. . . . I think if the legal system accepts the culture and also works together with the community, that is going to be helpful. So the community will have the power. The way that situations are handled are different than here, but if the legal allowed us to be that bridge, I think it will be helpful for both [our community and the system] . . . I think we could break down the

> problem . . . and there would be less problems because we could take care of the situation in the beginning (P3).

Studies by Owusu (2000) and McMichael and Manderson (2004) that were previously cited in this dissertation provided examples of how other refugee-background community organizations have preserved judicial functions in resettlement. Learning from other communities' experiences could also be useful for helping Karen women explore how to (re-)gain authority to resolve family problems in resettlement. Social workers could assist Karen women in identifying relevant examples and developing community responses that fit within U.S. legal systems.

Lastly, one participant described that she wanted existing services to partner with the work that they were doing to help Karen women through KCM–WC (P8). She shared her idea for how providers could support KCM–WC leaders in providing education on topics such as domestic violence and neighborhood safety to Karen women in apartment buildings, as well as provide assistance with what the women needed. She explained:

> What I am thinking about how I want to help the families is that I don't just want Karen women to go around and help the Karen people. If there as a western, like American, that could follow us and be with us, we could educate the family and go into the house together. Then they will have more education and more knowledge. That will help the family (P8).

Overall, given the areas that social workers practice and their mandate to provide culturally competent services, social workers can play important roles in advocating for systems changes, adapting existing services to be more accessible and culturally relevant, and developing innovative models of collaboration with Karen women that mobilize their existing strengths, skills, and resources and enhance existing services.

Training Implications

This study demonstrated the necessity of understanding behavior in its particular cultural context. As such, social workers and other professionals who work with refugee-background communities need specialized training and a knowledge base specific to the communities with whom they work, including about their cultural backgrounds and historically developed strengths, resources, and sociocultural self-help structures. They also need to understand immigration laws, resettlement services, and the political context of refugee resettlement (Lacroix et al., 2015). Findings concerning the tendency of outside support and resources to impose their agendas on refugee associations also suggest the importance of social workers developing knowledge and skills in cultural humility, cross-cultural collaboration, and antioppressive practice that will enable them to build trust with refugee-background communities. Measures could be designed and implemented to assess the competency of social work and resettlement professionals for serving new refugee-background groups. Measures could also be designed to assess the capacity of resettlement agencies or other organizations to serve new refugee-background groups and/or specific needs within groups.

Research Implications

Given the barriers identified in this dissertation, Karen and other refugee-background communities are likely not operating at their full capacity for self-help (McCabe, 2010). As such, their theoretical potential contributions to the resettlement system are not fully realized. A substantive theory is offered in this dissertation that could be tested with other Karen women, as well as with other ethnic groups, to better

understand barriers and supports that impact self-help. In general, much more research is needed about what historical self-help structures, systems, and processes are possessed by different refugee-background communities, and how well communities feel they are able to utilize these resources in resettlement.

Because this study examined existing refugee associations, it could not adequately identify all barriers refugee-background communities face in adapting and utilizing existing strengths and self-help structures in resettlement. Given the uniqueness of the Karen community in Minnesota, research with Karen communities in the United States who have not formed associations is necessary to understand these barriers. As Owusu (2000) claimed, "no single explanation of association formation, institution-building, and institutional support applies to all ethnic groups or to all members within a group" (p. 1177). Comparative research with Karen communities in other settings would also be valuable for isolating systemic and structural factors that impact agency and capacity for self-help. Longitudinal designs could also examine how communities adapt in responding to these barriers over time.

Religious beliefs have been identified as a significant part of Karen cultural traditions and lives of Karen people. Karen churches have been described as "powerful institutions in Karen communities," which offer material, informational, social, and emotional support for both Christian and non-Christian Karen (Gilhooly & Lynn, 2015, p. 810). One participant described that in other states where Karen communities have not been able to form community associations, Karen churches have played important roles in facilitating community self-help (P4). This study primarily focused on the

development and structure of KCM and KCM–WC, although several participants were also involved with women's committees and other leadership positions in Karen churches. It did not specifically examine the activities or structures of women's groups in Karen churches. Future research is needed to understand the role and function of Karen churches in facilitating self-help in resettlement, as well as to understand the relationships between religious and nonreligious Karen voluntary associations.

Intervention research is needed to identify what types of collaborations between refugee-background groups and existing services are feasible and effective. Intervention research is especially needed in the current era of scarce and diminishing resources for refugee services. As mentioned previously in this section, research is also needed to develop various assessment tools, including to identify existing community networks, self-help systems and dynamics and to assess to assess the competency of professionals and agencies for serving new refugee-background groups and/or specific needs of these groups.

Lastly, this study has implications for two areas of research and theorizing: social capital and refugee integration. Regarding social capital theory, it supports Anthias's (2007) argument that researchers need to distinguish between social cohesion or solidarity dimensions of social capital, definitions used by Coleman (1998) and Putnam (1995, 2000), with their instrumental uses and effects. In this study, significant potential bonding capital was identified in terms of norms of reciprocity and trust, yet these dimensions of social capital they did not necessarily mean that women could successfully engage in self-help. It is therefore important for researchers to examine not only the

existence of sociocultural networks and levels of social cohesion, but also the systemic and structural factors that impact a community's ability to actualize potential bonding capital into resources to meet their needs and goals (Anthias, 2007; Cederberg, 2012).

Second, social capital research has identified complex relationships between bonding and bridging or linking capital. While this study was not designed to examine social capital, specifically, some findings support the idea that a certain degree of bonding capital may be necessary to develop bridging capital, and that bonding capital can make up for low levels of other types of capital, such as cultural capital (Csedo, 2008; Erel, 2010). For example, KCM and other community leaders played bridging roles in accessing outside resources, such as information, that were then distributed through bonding networks. Future research could build on the findings of this study and explore more in-depth how Karen women and other leaders developed bridging and linking ties and distributed bridging and linking capital through bonding networks to advance knowledge in this area.

Findings also offer implications for integration theory. Integration is defined as a bidirectional process of mutual adaptation between new and existing communities (Strang & Ager, 2010). However, current research and funding for integration programs focus primarily on the processes through which refugee-background communities adapt to their new environment and the indicators for evaluating this progression (Ager & Strang, 2008). Similar emphasis and policies have not been developed to understand the processes through which existing services adapt to meet the needs of new communities or appropriate indicators for assessment of these processes (Kirkwood, McKinlay, &

McVittie, 2014; Strang & Ager, 2010). This study found that existing services were grossly unprepared to meet the needs of the Karen community. Furthermore, women faced significant systemic and structural barriers to accessing existing services and systems. As such, research emphasis on the systemic and structural barriers that inhibit integration is needed and overdue. In the language of social capital theory, more research emphasis is needed that explores the systemic and structural barriers people with refugee backgrounds face in trying to develop bridging and linking ties. Finally, this study found that having KCM facilitated the development of bridging and linking ties, which suggests that exploring the role refugee associations play in facilitating two-way integration may be relevant to understanding processes of integration.

Conclusion

This dissertation focused on the experiences of first generation Karen women in Minnesota. What emerged was a theory of power defined as agency and capacity to help each other in resettlement and several factors that impacted women's experiences of power. The findings address critical gaps in the literature by describing the processes through which Karen women (re)-build self-help structures, the structures themselves, the experiences of women, and their agency and capacity to mobilize resources to meet community-identified outcomes. It also focused on a refugee voluntary association, rather than a nonprofit ethnic community-based organization.

By centering the voices of Karen women and focusing on their role as active agents in their own resettlement, this study challenges dominant portrayals of people with refugee backgrounds as helpless and dependent (Mazur, 1988). Additionally, the process

of research itself was a political action because I involved Karen women in all aspects of design, data gathering and interpretation of meaning. I viewed this process as potentially empowering for Karen women, in contrast to the top-down, nonparticipatory approaches of the U.S. resettlement system. In other words, I saw this research process as giving voice to women's experiences that had been marginalized as well as challenging implicit assumptions and invisible manifestations of power asymmetries inherent in the resettlement process.

Findings support that Karen women arrived to the United States with considerable resources and willingness to support the successful resettlement of their community. However, their actual power or ability to respond to the needs of their community were impacted by numerous factors. While the categories identified in this study have been described in other research, the present findings add knowledge that is situated in cultural context in relation to the experiences of Karen women. This study is also unique in its construction of a preliminary theory that explains how these categories are related to each other and how they impacted participants' power to engage in self-help in resettlement.

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Appendix A

Examples of Organizational Structures from Thai Refugee Camps

Figures are provided by the Border Consortium (2012).

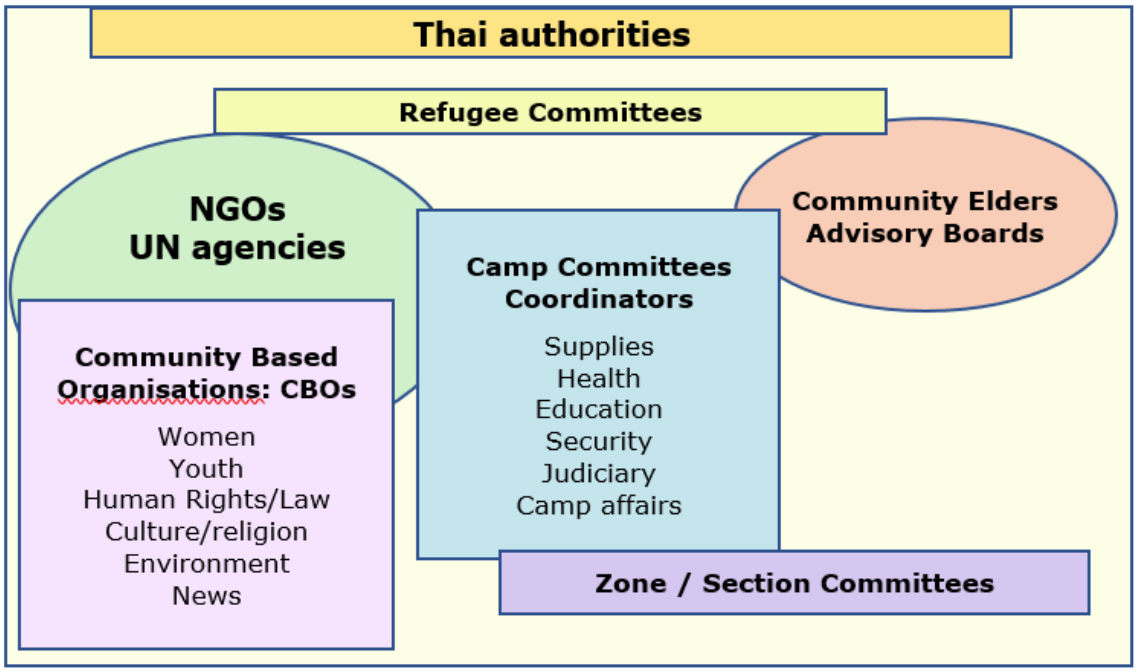

Figure A-1. Organizational structure of Thai refugee camp.
(Adapted from original image.)

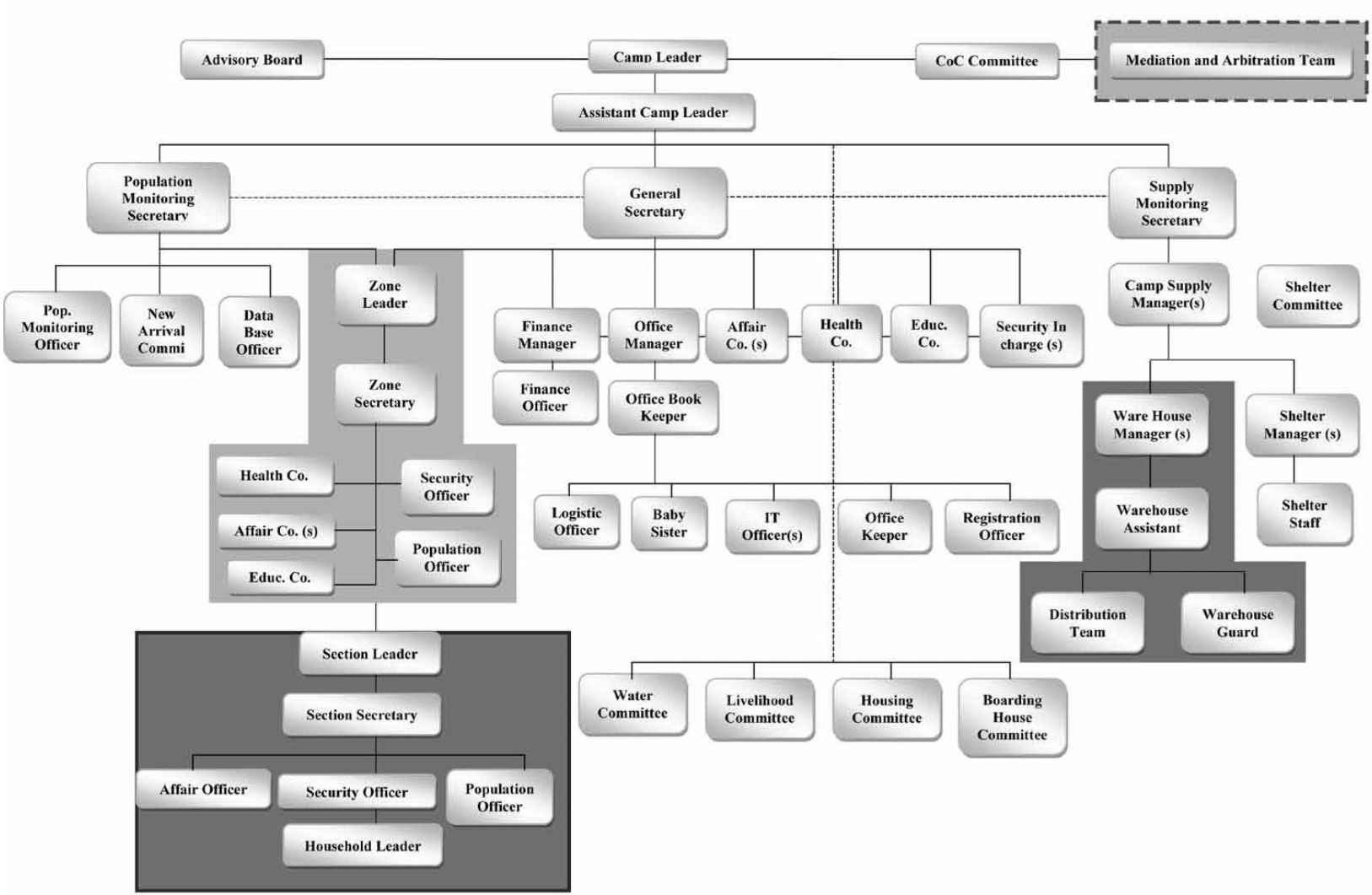

Figure A-2. Organizational structure of Thai refugee camp.

Appendix B

Phone and Email Recruitment Script

“Hello, my name is Tonya Cook. I am a student at the University of Minnesota and I am conducting a research study. As part of the study, I would like to interview Karen women who are active in their community, for example, with the Karen Community of Minnesota Women's Committee or women's committees of churches. You were referred to me by _____*. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Individual interviews are approximately 90 minutes, and if you prefer to use a Karen interpreter, I will provide one. If you agree, I may ask to interview you up to 3 times. You may also be invited to participate in a focus group, which would be approximately 120 minutes long. Are you interested in learning more about this study?”

* Per IRB policy, which is to inform potential participants about how I received, or by whom, I received participants’ names or contact information, I will inform each potential participant of the specific name of the Karen cultural consultant who identified them as a key informant.

Appendix C

Consent Form

Introduction

You are invited to be in a research study about Karen women's organizing in St. Paul, MN. You were selected because you are a member of the Karen Community of Minnesota Women's Committee or another women's committee or someone who may have knowledge about the work of Karen women. We ask you to read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Tonya Cook, student researcher from the University of Minnesota School of Social Work and Drs. Elizabeth Lightfoot and Patricia Shannon, faculty advisors at the University of Minnesota.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to understand why Karen women organize in Minnesota, what their goals are, what strategies they use to meet their goals, and how well they are

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in an in-depth interview that will last about 90 minutes. I may ask you to participate in up to three interviews. I may also ask you to participate in a focus/discussion group that would last up to 120 minutes. All interviews and/or focus/discussion groups will take place at a location and time that is convenient for you. If you agree to participate, I will audio record our interview(s). The information we learn from this study will help us develop models of social work community practice that build on the goals, strengths, and work already being conducted by Karen women.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

There are minimal risks to participating in this study. I will collect your name, phone number, and email address for the purpose of following up with you during the course of the study; therefore there is a risk that your privacy or confidentiality could be breached. Your privacy and confidentiality are important to us. The steps we take to protect them are described later in this form.

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. What we learn will help us to develop education and training for social workers who may work with Karen people.

Compensation

You will receive a $25 gift card for each interview and/or focus group that you participate in as a part of this study.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. We will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject in any report we publish. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality. Only approved research staff will have access to the audio recordings, which will be erased immediately after the interview is transcribed. Any identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study in May 2017.

There is one instance where I might have to break confidentiality. If you say in our conversation that a child is being abused or at risk of being abused, I am required by law to tell the authorities and try to protect that child.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without consequence.

Contacts and Questions

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Tonya Cook at the University of Minnesota, 612-625-6006, cookx450@umn.edu or her advisors, Elizabeth Lightfoot, 612-624-4710, elightfo@umn.edu or Patricia Shannon, 612-624-3490, pshannon@umn.edu at the University of Minnesota.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Witness: _____ Date: _____
(If applicable)

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

☐ Check this box if participant waived documentation of informed consent.

Appendix D

Individual Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am going to ask you some questions about the community organizing that Karen women do in your community, for example, the work of the Karen Community of Minnesota Women's Committee (KCM–WC) or women's committees in churches. I am interested in the reasons that women do this work, their goals, the strategies they use to meet these goals, and how effective they are. I am also interested in how culture, gender, and migration impact these strategies. I will use this information to help social workers better understand how to support the work that your community is doing.

1) How are you involved with KCM–WC or other women's groups? What's your role?
    a. When did you first get involved?
    b. Are you involved with any other Karen women's groups in MN?
    c. Did you have a role with women's orgs in Burma or Thailand?

2) How and why did KCM–WC or other women's groups form in MN?
    a. How did they form?
    b. By whom/who was involved with their formation?
    c. Why did they form/for what purpose?
    d. What do women's groups do in MN?
    e. How effective are women's groups in MN?
    f. What do Karen women's groups do well?
        Can you tell me a story about a time when you think the work of KCMWC was particularly successful?
    g. What skills, resources, or supports do Karen women need to do this work?
    h. What challenges or obstacles do women face?
    i. What can you use from your experiences in Burma or Thailand? What had to be modified?
    j. What can you do here that you couldn't do there, and vice versa?

3) How and why did women's organizations start in Burma or Thailand?
    a. How did they form?
    b. By whom/who was involved with their formation?
    c. Why did they form/for what purpose?
    d. What do women's groups do in BU/TH?
    e. How effective were women's groups in BU/TH?
    f. What made them effective?
    g. What would make them effective in MN?

h. What obstacles or challenges did women's orgs face in BU/TH?

4) Why do you volunteer to do this work?

5) What advice would you have for Karen women in the U.S. who wanted to start an organization?
   a. What have you learned from your experiences in the U.S. that you would share with them?

Impact of Gender

6) Do you think being a woman makes it easier or harder to accomplish your goals? Why or why not? Can you think of an example?

7) Do you feel Karen women have the same goals as other community leaders, or different? Can you think of an example?

Impact of Culture & Migration

8) Did you have to do [this activity] in Burma or Thailand? If so, what did it look like there, how did coming here impact ability to get things done for your community?

9) Is it more or less difficult to use the same organizing strategies since coming to the U.S.? Can you give me an example of something you used to do that is more difficult? Something new that you do that is more helpful?

10) Would you have had to do [this activity] this way in Burma or Thailand? Did you have to do it differently here, and how did you figure that out? If you were to go back to Thailand or Burma, what would you do differently? What advice would you share with them?

11) How do you think being Karen influences the way you work with your community?

12) Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?

Appendix E

Example Revised Individual Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am going to ask you some questions about the community organizing that Karen women do in your community, for example, the work of the Karen Community of Minnesota Women's Committee (KCMWC) or women's committees in churches. I am interested in the reasons that women do this work, their goals, and the strategies they use to meet these goals. I am also interested in how culture, gender, and migration impact these strategies. I will use this information to help social workers better understand how to support the work that your community is doing.

1) How are you involved with KCMWC (or another women's organization)?
    a. What's your role?
    b. What do you do in your role? What are your responsibilities?
    c. When did you first get involved?
    d. Are you involved with any other Karen community or women's groups in MN?
    e. Did you have a role with women's orgs in BU/TH? If so, what was your role and what did you do?

2) Do you feel like you had more power to organize Karen women and help your community in Burma or Thailand or in Minnesota? What do you think the reasons are for that?
    a. What do you think made women's groups more powerful to do _____ in _____?
    b. What can women's groups do in MN that you couldn't do in Burma and Thailand, and vice versa?
    c. Were you more active in Burma/Thailand or Minnesota? Do you think Karen women's groups were more active in Burma and Thailand or in Minnesota? What do you think the reasons are for that?
    d. Can you think of other examples things you feel like you had more power to do in the U.S.? In Burma or Thailand? What do you think are the reasons you had more power in that setting?
    e. What does power mean to you?

3) Other participants said that Karen women were more active and engaged in Burma and Thailand, and that the Karen women's organizations in MN don't do too much compared to Thailand and Burma. Do you agree? Why do you think that is? Is it related to power? How?

4) What does the word power mean to you? How do you say it in Karen language?
    a. What kind of power do Karen women's organizations want or need? What would they be able to do?

5) Some people said that Karen women's organizations had more power in Burma and Thailand because they were able to connect to the "upper leaders" or leaders in power, who were Karen. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
    a. Why is it hard to connect to leaders in power in the U.S.?
    b. Do women leaders want to connect to them? Why or why not?
    c. What kind of power do women's organizations want? Who would they get it from?
    d. How easy would it be to connect with them?
    e. How could those systems give Karen women's organizations more power?

6) What about Karen culture do U.S. systems and people in power need to know about Karen people to be able to work with them?

7) One reason that participants said it was harder to have power to help Karen women in Minnesota was that Karen people don't tell their leaders when a family is having a problem because they are afraid of the legal system in the U.S. and privacy laws. Do you agree? Can you explain that to me?
    a. What does bad credit mean and why are people afraid of it?
    b. What do people think will happen if they talk about another family's problems (related to "privacy")?

8) Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Explore these cultural concepts:
1) Ah-na
2) "understanding each other"
3) "bad credit" (In the US)
4) "privacy" (in the US)
5) "being pushed down"
6) "looking down on one self"

Appendix F

Visual Representation of Data Analysis Procedures

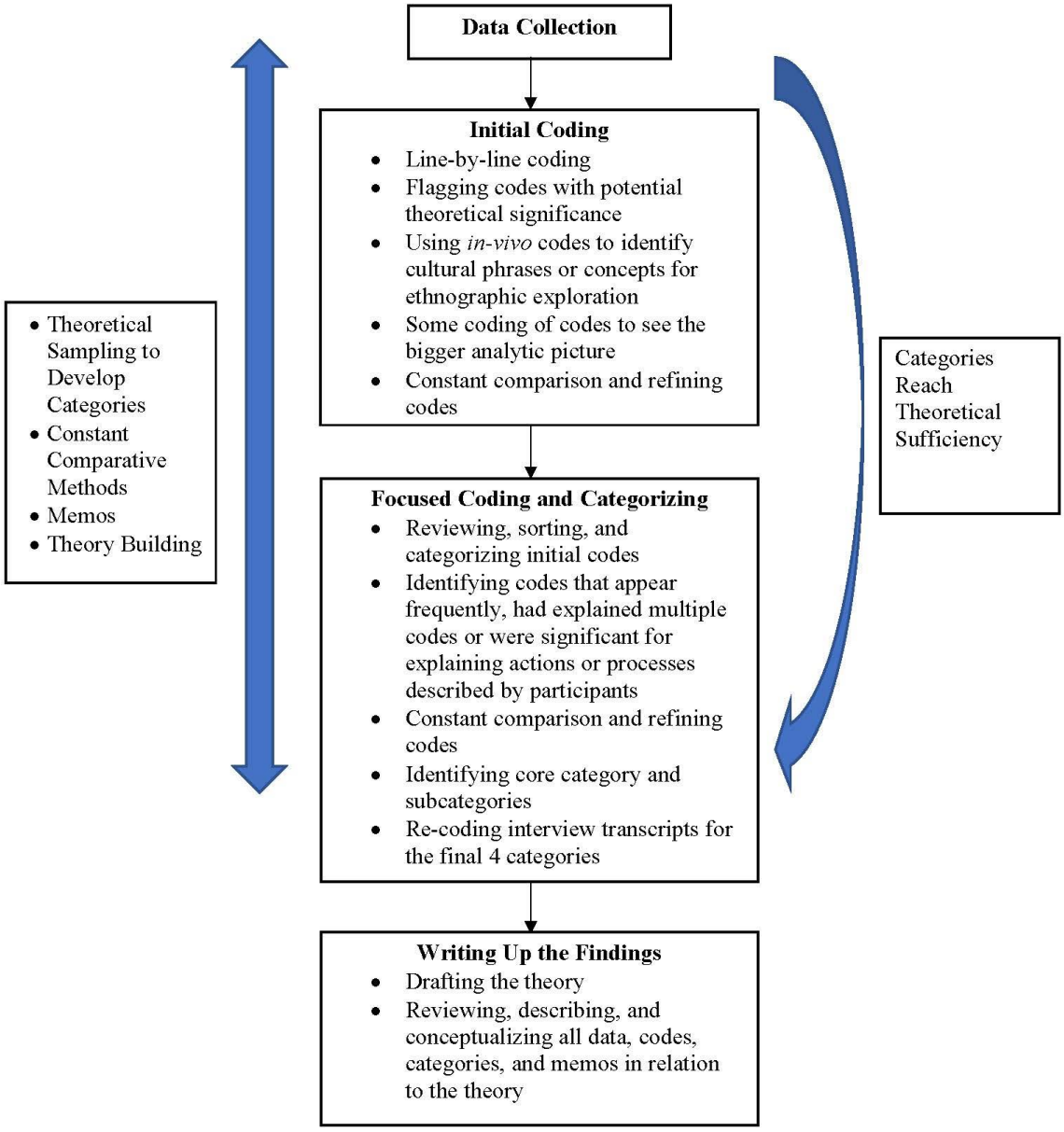

Figure F-1. Data analysis procedures (based on Charmaz, 2014).

Appendix G

Member Check Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me again. I have talked to 10 Karen women about how they organize in Burma, Thailand, and Minnesota and today I would like to share with you about what I learned from this study. As I explain what I learned, I would like your feedback about whether you agree with my analysis, disagree with anything I say, or if you would add or change anything. Please give me your honest feedback.

1) Many participants in this study talked about power. Several women, including yourself, said that you did not feel like you had power to organize in MN, and that women's groups in MN had less power than they did in Burma or Thailand. Some women felt like they had more power to organize in Minnesota compared to the areas where they lived in Burma. I found several reasons why women described having less power in Minnesota. I would like to share them with you.
2) Women said the type of power that they wanted was to help their community. Do you agree with this definition of power? How do you think about power?

Forming an Organization in Resettlement

3) The community formed KCM because they saw that U.S. resettlement systems were not able to help them very well, and they felt like they had to form an organization so they could help themselves. Do you agree?
4) One current problem facing the Karen community that was mentioned in interviews was family problems. Do you think U.S. systems are helpful for Karen families with family problems? If U.S. systems were more helpful, do you think the community would still want power? What kind of power would they want?
5) Its seems like the goals of women's groups changed when they came to the U.S. Specifically, the goals in the U.S. were related to helping with resettlement and *family problems*, whereas the goals in Burma and Thailand seemed to focus more on empowering women (e.g., training on women's rights) and political empowerment of women (getting women elected to positions). That was the work that you were involved with for so long. I understand that the goals changed for several reasons: 1) they don't have time to do women's empowerment in the U.S. because they are too busy helping with other things, 2) there are more immediate needs that they have to help with, and 3) women don't know the laws about women's rights in the U.S. so they don't know how to do training on this topic. Do you agree? Is there anything you would add?

Personal Relationships

6) Women talked about how they organized Karen women. Do you have anything to add to this list?
    a. Visiting women and getting to know them and finding out what are their needs
    b. Engaging with the women's org through, training, education, and practical support (a developmental approach to individual and collective empowerment)
    c. Validating women's strengths and skills
    d. Mentoring leaders
    e. Collaboration and having someone to back them up
    f. Women who received help and training then can help other women

7) Women described that relationships were related to having power to organize.
    a. Knowing each other was important to identifying and nominating leaders because women never nominated themselves for leadership positions. Do you agree?
    b. Women described that it was harder to organize people who didn't know each other, for example, if they were from different camps. Can you explain to me why this is?

8) Women described that they had more power to help people when they knew the ones they were helping.
    a. People are ah-na and some might not know how to ask for help, so if you know someone you can see what they need and offer help without them having to ask. When people don't know each other in the U.S., they might not get help because no one knows about their need.
    b. If you know someone, you understand better what is causing their problems and what they need (e.g., family problems).
    c. In Burma or Thailand, neighbors could tell leaders about a family's problems, but they don't do that in the U.S. because they are afraid of *legal*.

Having an Official and Institutional Role and Power

9) Another reason women's groups had less power in the U.S. was that they were not connected to the "upper leaders" or "under their own leaders" like they were in some places in Burma and Thailand. This is related to their power in the U.S. because here: 1) they don't know who the leaders are, 2) they don't know the system here, 3) they don't know how to connect to leaders or systems to get power, 4) they are afraid of the system here, 5) they don't want to partner with some systems because they don't think they are helpful and sometimes they make problems worse. Is there anything you would add?

10) Women's groups don't have authority in the U.S. because they are not "official." They don't have power over Karen families. They can't visit without being invited, they can't divide the family, they can't make the decisions for the family,

they can't enforce the laws, so they have less power. Women said they can only visit, but they don't have power to tell them what to do. Did I understand that correctly? Can you explain it in your own words?

a. Some people came from places in Burma where there weren't any systems that could help women or families. They said they felt like they had more power in the U.S. because there are organizations to help people, like women's shelters. What do you think about that?

Knowledge

11) Women also said knowledge was important to have power, including about the following things:
    a. The organizational structure and how to organize the community
    b. U.S. legal and social service systems so you can help families
    c. Is there anything I am missing?

12) Women who had knowledge about U.S. legal and social service systems, e.g., domestic violence shelters and how to access them, said they had more power. Do you think giving women more knowledge about what agencies can help Karen women and families in the U.S. would make them feel more powerful?

13) When women did not have knowledge, they looked down on their self. I think this is related to their experiences of being pushed down because of their ethnicity and gender in Burma and Thailand because of their gender and ethnicity. One way to give them confidence is to give them knowledge. Do you agree? Why is this important to Karen women?

Other Resources

14) Time—even if you know how to organize and help people and you have a women's organization, you don't have power to do it if you don't have time

15) Transportation—if you can't get together, you can't organize or help people

16) Financial resources—what resources do you think are necessary for a women's organization to have power?

17) Having a supportive family—when your family supports you to be a woman leader, you have more power. For example, you have less power if your husband pushes you down.

18) Do these categories explain why you feel like you have less power in Minnesota to organize Karen women?

19) What else do you think gives Karen women power to organize and help each other in Minnesota?

20) Do you have any other ideas that you would like to share?

Appendix H

Partial Organizational Chart of the Karen Community of Minnesota,

Highlighting Women's Committee

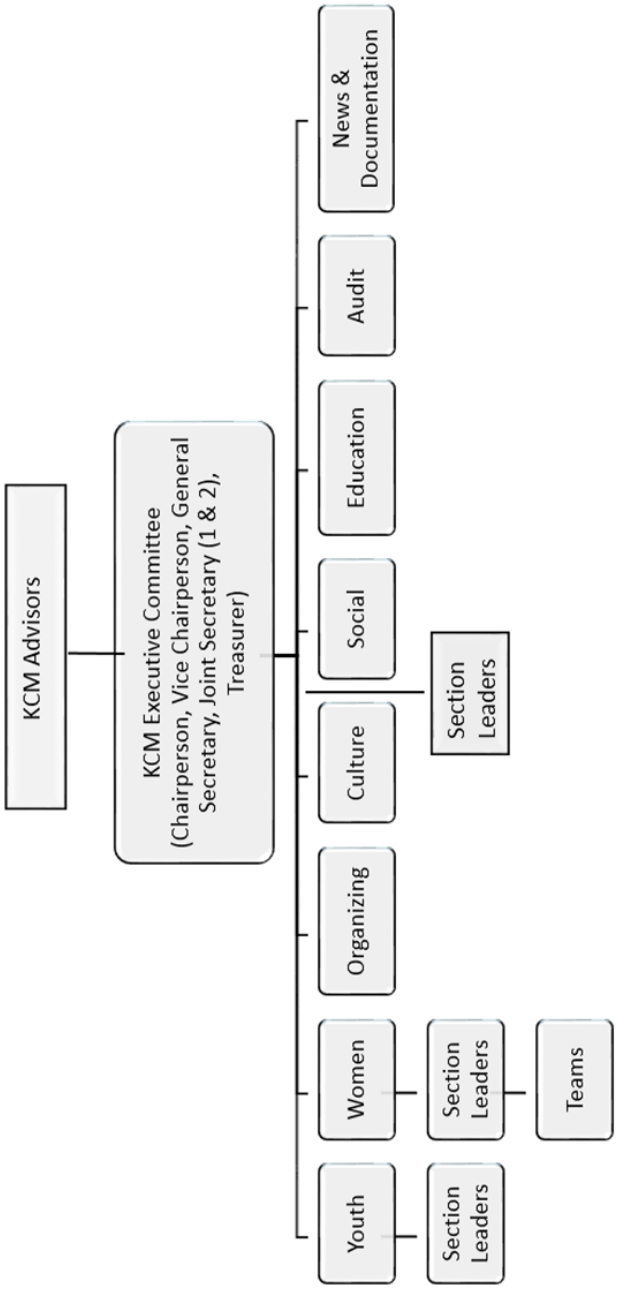

Figure H-1. Partial KCM organizational chart, highlighting Women's Committee.