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## Experiences of parenting among Burmese refugee mothers in a facilitated playgroup

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Dated: 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2012

Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in a Facilitated Playgroup

Beth McLaughlin

A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of  
Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,  
Edith Cowan University.  
Submitted October, 2012

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## Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in a Facilitated Playgroup

## Abstract

Negotiating parenting in a new cultural context represents one of the more considerable challenges faced by refugee families. Parenting practices are often interpreted differently, and varying rates of acculturation between parent and child may lead to intergenerational conflict. This is particularly pertinent for most Southeast Asian refugees who originate from collectivist cultures, however following resettlement are confronted with an unfamiliar culture that values individualism. Importantly, facilitated playgroups have recently been found to play a pivotal role in providing support for refugee families and establishing links to the wider community. Despite this growing understanding, research exploring the refugee parenting experience, and role of facilitated playgroup in supporting refugees when raising children remains scarce. Therefore, the present study aimed to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of parenting amongst a group of Burmese refugee mothers in a facilitated playgroup. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted on nine mothers currently attending a facilitated playgroup program. Two playgroup staff and one external stakeholder further comprised the sample of informants. Findings revealed the multiple hardships experienced by Burmese refugee mothers, often characterised by finding a balance between preserving cultural tradition and adjusting to the prevailing norms of the host society. Comparatively, providing supportive resources to these mothers, like facilitated playgroup, was found to produce a compounding impact in a positive direction. Based on findings it was argued that the continued exploration of refugee parenting is paramount, in an attempt to better understand the complex nature of their experiences, and importantly give voice to some of Australian refugee families.

Beth McLaughlin

Supervisor: Associate Professor Andrew Guilfoyle

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### Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in a Facilitated Playgroup

Refugee families arrive in Australia with unique psychological needs, often facing a range of adjustment difficulties (Dagler, Melhuish & Barnes, 2011). Psychological literature suggests that negotiating parenting in an unfamiliar culture can be one of the more critical challenges influencing the successful resettlement of refugee families (Lewig, Arney & Salveron, 2010; Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). Many refugees share common experiences of war, cultural dislocation and separation from extended kin which have profound impacts on the functioning and structure of families. Upon arrival to the host country, family life is also significantly impacted by the difficulties of re-building lives in new cultural, social, political and economic contexts (McMichael, Gifford, & Correa-Velez, 2011). Such difficulties include the stress associated with host culture adaptation, housing, changing family dynamics, language barriers, and re-establishing social networks (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011).

Thus, refugee families are confronted with a wide variety of factors that can negatively influence parenting and parent-child functioning. Many of these parenting factors will mirror those faced by mainstream Australian parents, for instance issues associated with mental health, physical health, poverty, social isolation and behavioural problems of children (Renzaho & Vignjevic, 2011). However, refugee families often encounter significant, additional parenting challenges to those of mainstream society as parenting is rapidly transformed into often unpredictable and uncontrollable situations. Specifically, refugee parents from collectivist cultures, face considerable barriers associated with culturally different childrearing ideals and adjusting their traditional parenting approaches to reflect those of the host society (Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Renzaho, Green, Mellor & Swinburn, 2011). The situation may further be compounded by experiences of intergenerational conflict, where varying rates of acculturation can create distance between parents and their children.

Seeking parenting support and assistance can also be a difficult task for refugee parents with a limited understanding of available services, often resulting in their complex needs going undetected (Riggs, 2012). Exposure to these factors often means that refugee parents, experience ongoing disadvantage and a reduced capacity to adjust to their new host environment (Riggs, 2012).

The notion of developing family support as a means of protecting the wellbeing of all parents and children is not new, and the significance attached to building support particularly for vulnerable families, is a key aspect of preventative work (Dolan & Sherlock, 2012). For many marginalised and disadvantaged families, such as refugees, access to and availability of childcare services plays a significant role in the provision of social support (Jackson, 2006). Specifically, research has begun to draw attention to the protective characteristics of facilitated playgroup programs and the potential such services have to strengthen refugee families. However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of facilitated playgroups in creating positive outcomes for refugee families, the focused exploration of how such programs support mothers in their parenting role remains limited.

Given this lack of research on refugee parenting generally, and also the role of playgroup in socially supporting these parents, the current research will explore the lived experiences of parenting amongst a group of Burmese refugee mothers, in the context of a supported playgroup environment. In this way, the current research will enable a deeper understanding of refugee mother's experiences of parenting and use of social support services. First, a brief overview of refugees in an Australian context will be outlined. Next, an overview of the psychological impacts of forced migration, in the context of pre and post displacement factors, will be discussed. The concept of acculturation will then be defined in an attempt to provide a requisite understanding of how refugee parenting adjustments are impacted upon arrival to the host society. Finally, a review of existing literature on refugee

parenting and facilitated playgroup will be discussed, which embodies contemporary knowledge of the topic.

### **Refugee Resettlement in an Australian Context**

In Australia, the Humanitarian Scheme includes an offshore and onshore program, and allows the approval and resettlement of refugees (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2011). Every year the focus of the humanitarian program tends to change based on the global need for resettlement. A refugee is defined as any individual; living outside their country of origin, experiencing a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and is unable to seek protection from their home country (DIAC, 2006). In terms of resettlement locations, Western Australia is considered the fourth largest site in Australia, including a total of 12.8% of refugees arriving from 2006 to 2011 (DIAC, 2006).

### **Psychological Impacts of the Refugee Experience**

#### **Pre-migration factors**

The ongoing psychological impacts associated with pre-migration trauma on resettlement have been a longstanding focus of the refugee literature (see Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008 for a review). Traumatic experiences can include violations of human rights, traumatic loss, dispossession and threats to life. Such events have been found to differentially impact resettlement outcomes. For example, one study by Schweitzer (2006), found that traumatic loss had deleterious effects on psychosocial wellbeing and successful adjustment. Importantly, consistent and strong links have been demonstrated between pre-migration trauma and successful resettlement outcomes (Murray et al., 2008; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008; Schweitzer, 2006; Steel, Silove, Bird, McGorry, & Mohan, 1999). Research has shown that refugee experiences of pre-migration trauma are typically interrelated and cumulative, compared with single event traumas (Schweitzer, 2006). In this way, refugees

resettling in a new host culture often experience higher levels of accumulative stress and adjustment difficulties than other immigrant populations.

Research regarding the effects of pre-migration trauma has explored the relative importance of demographic variables in predicting refugee resettlement outcomes (Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008). This method is considered advantageous in better understanding risk profiles for refugees requiring additional support. According to DIAC (2010-2011), 12.7% of refugee category allocation was granted to women and children at risk, recognising the protection of those who are in particularly vulnerable situations. In line with current global trends, research has shown that for refugee women and children, experiences of pre migration trauma results in worse resettlement outcomes (Schweitzer, 2006).

### **Post-migration factors**

Increased attention on resettlement issues, in the context of post-migration stressors, has been evident in contemporary research, demonstrating a shift away from a previous emphasis on pre-displacement trauma (Murray et al., 2008). Such research has highlighted that adjustment difficulties experienced during post-migration are complex and can significantly affect the psychosocial wellbeing and resettlement outcomes of individuals who are refugees (Dagler, Melhuish, & Barnes, 2011). Schweitzer et al. (2011) found that while experiences of post-migration trauma significantly affected mental wellbeing, post-displacement difficulties had greater salience in predicting mental health outcomes.

Post migration stressors experienced by refugees can include language barriers, feelings of isolation, different cultural expectations of behaviour, and loss of traditional supports due to separation from family and community networks (Riggs, 2012; Shakespeare-Finch, & Wickham, 2009; Tingvold, Hauff, Allen, & Middelthon, 2012). For example, research by Ryan, Dooley and Benson (2008) found that refugees reported identity adjustments, unemployment and social isolation as serious resettlement difficulties. These

factors may be further compounded by barriers to inclusion, such as poverty, lack of housing, discrimination, and a limited understanding of mainstream services (Shakespeare-Finch, & Wickham, 2009). Post-migration challenges impact on the wellbeing of refugees by contributing to feelings of social exclusion, often resulting in a lack of confidence to participate in the broader Australian community.

According to DIAC (2006), 61% of refugees arriving to Australia comprise of families with children, with a considerable proportion from Southeast Asian backgrounds. Research shows that refugee families who migrate or have children face additional post-resettlement difficulties with regard to differences in parenting practices and childrearing beliefs between their home country and new host environment (Kotchick, & Forehand, 2002). Hence, researchers have argued that negotiating parenting in an unfamiliar culture continues to represent one of the most significant resettlement challenges experienced by refugee families (Lewig et al. 2010; Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011; Renzaho, Swinburn & McCabe 2008).

### **Understanding Acculturation: A Conceptual Framework**

The concept of acculturation provides a basic framework for understanding how parenting adjustments in a new environment are influenced by a diverse range of factors including the cultural norms of both the sending and host societies (Williams, & Berry, 1991). Acculturation refers to the processes of socio-cultural and psychological change that occurs, at an individual, group or community level, as a result of distinctive cultures coming in contact. Related concepts include adaptation, and acculturation stress. Adaptation is considered a consequence of acculturation determining subjective well-being and socio-cultural competence (Sam, & Berry, 2010). Acculturation stress is a response to cultural differences encountered between the traditional and host culture, which can adversely affect the adaptation of acculturating individuals or groups (Sam, & Berry, 2010).

Throughout processes of acculturation, refugee parents are compelled to make several changes regarding new ways of living, for instance, what to eat, what language to speak, how to interact with family members and mainstream society and whether or not to maintain traditional values and patterns of behaviour. Williams and Berry (1991) argues that these changes may provoke acculturation stress, given the notion that changing one's culture to another can challenge an individual's deepest loyalties. Consequently, when this form of stress occurs, the decision making, functioning, and overall wellbeing of refugee parents and families can be adversely affected. As an added burden, acculturation stress often occurs concurrently while also coping with past traumatic experiences of war and human rights violations (Tingvold et al. 2012). The cumulative nature of these stressors further complicates the acculturation experience for refugee parents and their families. Below, research which aims to understand the unique and complex interplay of acculturation processes' impacting upon refugee parenting is reviewed in full.

### **Challenges to Refugee Parenting: Literature Review**

Acculturation research suggests that parenting within a new host culture is associated with a number of cross-cultural challenges (Ochocka, & Janzen, 2008; Renzaho, et al. 2011). Parenting orientations and practices often appear incongruent with traditional parenting learned from their home country (Renzaho et al., 2011; Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011). This is particularly pertinent for Southeast Asian populations who come from collectivist cultures, but upon arrival to Australia experience an unfamiliar environment that promotes individualism (Dagler et al. 2011; Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011). Despite this, literature on refugee parenting generally, but also in the context of Southeast Asian refugee families remains a relatively unexplored field (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). While some research exists, the vast majority of studies rely upon international data, and often neglect to make distinctions between refugee and migrant groups. The absence of any comprehensive study of

parenting amongst refugee groups highlights a major paucity in understanding the complex settlement experiences of these families. However, reference to other academic work comprising samples of various migrant groups, can be useful for providing a contextual basis for understanding the potential challenges refugee parents may face when raising children in a new cultural context.

Early attempts to conceptualise cross-cultural parenting among migrant populations largely relied upon existing Western models of parenting (Renzaho, McCabe, & Sainsbury, 2011). Ochocka and Janzen (2008) argued that research often included the application of Western based categories, such as authoritarian and authoritative styles of parenting, to non-Western migrant families (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008; Renzaho et al. 2011). This was despite the growing recognition that such parenting categories may hold different meanings and applications across cultures. Overtime, Western based models were criticised for failing to recognise the impact and centrality of cultural values, practices and norms (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). More contemporary researchers argue that in reality a wide range of ecological factors requires consideration. Thus research has more recently begun to explore the contextual factors impacting upon the parenting practices of various migrant groups in ever changing ecologies, importantly acknowledging the bidirectional nature of both cultural background, and newly acquired context (Xua, et al. 2005). As the disparities between Southeast Asian collectivist cultures and Western individualist cultures are large, factors relating to tensions between traditional and mainstream parenting norms, divergent approaches to discipline, intergenerational conflicts, and the impacts of parenting in the absence of social support have increasingly become a focus throughout research (Chalmers, 2006; Renzaho et al. 2011).

**Discrepancies between traditional and mainstream parenting norms.**

Within collectivist cultures, family loyalty, adherence to group norms, and maintenance of harmony in relationships are the core values guiding parenting approaches (Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011; Tingvold et al., 2012). Reliance upon the support of immediate and extended family networks are also highly valued. However, subsequent to migration, Southeast Asian parents encounter an unfamiliar cultural context where individualistic methods of childrearing are the norm (Renzaho, & Vignjevic, 2011). Such approaches promote children's autonomy, independence and personal freedom, where childrearing is considered an individual matter, and not a collectivist responsibility. Consequently, these disparities in parenting values and a lack of validation of collective childrearing practices have been shown to represent a major source of tension for parents (Kotchick, & Forehand, 2002).

Past international research by Ochocka and Janzen (2008) illuminated this tension and found for a group of migrant parents from Southern China, living in a new Western culture had resulted in them questioning both their collective parenting values and practices (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). For example, they found that parents spoke about the tensions experienced resulting from the growing independence of their older children, and perceived shift in power and control from parent to child, as the child became more assertive and demanding (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). Although participants comprised of various immigrant groups, Mandarin parents were identified as refugees, and therefore it was unclear whether their experiences were contingent on migrant status. This methodological concern is not uncommon, and represents a notable limitation within literature which fails to consider the unique pre and post migration experiences of refugee groups.

To further illustrate the importance of considering the unique refugee parenting experience, research by Tajima and Harachi (2010) found that although Vietnamese and

Cambodian migrants encountered challenges regarding the impact of the host culture in shaping parenting beliefs, results also demonstrated nuanced differences between the two groups. Specifically, among the Vietnamese higher degrees of acculturation was associated with greater beliefs in independent thinking, compared with the Cambodians, where higher degrees of acculturation was associated with greater belief in obedience. The authors posited that as the majority of Cambodian parents were refugees, experiences of genocide and war, where obedience could mean the difference between life and death, may have impacted their parenting beliefs post-migration (Tajima & Harachi, 2010). They suggested that Cambodian informants reacted to their tumultuous pasts by preserving more strongly their traditional cultural beliefs, such as the value of obedience. The authors concluded overall that acculturation effects interact with socio-cultural factors to shape parenting beliefs, and urged further investigation specifically among refugee cultural groups (Tajima & Harachi, 2010).

Reflective of an ecological framework, Australian research by Lewig et al. (2010) responded to this call by exploring the unique challenges faced by refugee parents in their new host society. The authors found that for refugees, their traditional parenting methods were severely challenged. Despite the psychological impacts of pre-migration trauma, for some families the disparities between childrearing values and practices had such a significant effect on mental wellbeing that the parents considered returning to their home country (Lewig et al., 2010). Specifically, the authors documented the tension between Australian individualistic parenting, and the traditional collective parenting practices of refugee families. For example, the refugee parents reported reliance upon immediate and extended family networks for support in childrearing. However, in some cases this led to child protection issues when parents left their children unsupervised, as authorities did not recognise that older siblings could care for younger family members within their culture. As Lewig et al. (2010) found, the importance of culture in meanings of refugee parenting, and the influence

of the host country in shaping parenting practices needs to be further investigated if we are to support parents rather than punish them.

### **Approaches to discipline.**

While physical discipline is a widely explored construct within the context of parenting generally, few studies have focused on refugee populations (Maiter, & George, 2003; Tingvold et al., 2012). However, within limited literature, research exploring the association between acculturation and beliefs about the use of physical discipline has comprised a specific focus. Studies have found that culturally different disciplinary practices present considerable challenges, particularly for Southeast Asian refugee parents (Tingvold et al., 2012).

Research by Harachi, (1997) had found that Vietnamese and Cambodian refugee parents reported concerns regarding how to discipline children in their cultural context. In fact, parents identified approaches to discipline as the domain of parenting most impacted following resettlement. Recent research by Chhoeun (2008) further supported this through investigation of whether cultural adaptation of Cambodian refugee's impact parental beliefs of physical punishment. Informants discussed the challenges associated with different cultural practices in disciplining children, specifically, the use of physical punishment. Tensions were experienced because the majority of refugee parents believed the use of physical discipline was the most effective way to manage children's behaviour in their home countries. Critically, parents felt that not being allowed to use physical discipline meant they were powerless to control their children.

More recent international research by Tajima, and Harachi (2010) aimed to explore the parenting attitudes and physical discipline practices of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees. Findings revealed that over half of these Southeast Asian parents continued to strongly endorse and use physical punishment as a means of managing their children (Tajima

& Harachi, 2010). As a quantitative methodology was utilised, drawing upon standardised acculturation scales and measures of discipline, an in-depth exploration that takes into account the full meaning and contextual influences on refugee parent's beliefs and use of physical punishment was lacking. However, results revealed that the majority of parents continuing to use physical punishment were also those experiencing the greatest intergenerational conflict with their older, adolescent children (Tajima, & Harachi, 2010). In support of this, research by Park (2001) also noted that higher degrees of mother-child acculturation conflict were found to reflect stronger approval of physical discipline. Importantly, findings contribute to better understanding beliefs regarding the use of physical discipline among refugee parents. However, further in-depth investigation moving beyond the general attitudes revealed by Tajima and Harachi (2010) is needed to examine how meanings of discipline are impacted in a refugee context.

### **Intergenerational conflicts.**

Discrepancies in traditional versus host country parenting values have also been found to generate disharmony or acculturation gaps between refugee parents and their children (Lim, Yeh, Liang, Lau, & McCabe, 2009). Of existing literature, acculturation gap has importantly been identified as one of the more frequently experienced challenges confronting Southeast Asian refugee parents (Kwak & Berry, 2001; Yoonsun, He & Harachi, 2008). Acculturation gap is frequently cited to highlight the variations in ethnic versus host culture orientations between refugee parents and their children (Koh, Shao & Wang, 2009). Intergenerational conflict can occur when parents attempt to maintain traditional cultural values, such as interdependence and family unity, while children seek to adopt host cultural values such as independence and autonomy.

Past research by Yoonsun et al. (2008) found that acculturation gaps between parent and child were associated with high degrees of conflict amongst Vietnamese and Cambodian

migrant and refugee families. Specifically, parents attempted to maintain cultural continuity and were ambivalent to alter culture-sanctioned familial values. The authors found that parents perceived mainstream culture as a threat and therefore attempted to rigorously reinforce values associated with their country of origin. This increased tensions between children and resulted in family conflict (Yoonsun et al., 2008). Neglecting to explore the refugee parent's experiences of intergenerational conflicts from a gender based perspective can be considered a limitation of this research. As Williams (2010) suggests, in many refugee contexts, the roles of both mothers and fathers change as a result of pre and post migration factors, necessitating further exploration of refugee parenting based on gender specific experiences. Despite this, parallel findings were noted in more recent research by McMichael et al. (2011).

Specifically, McMichael et al. (2011) explored the intergenerational challenges associated with family life in the host society. Informants described serious and recurrent interpersonal conflict within the household which revolved around discordant values between parent and child. Specifically, parents spoke about the difficulties they experienced with negotiating between maintenance of cultural continuity and their child's increased value of independence. These experiences resulted in a perceived erosion of attachment, deterioration of communication amongst family members, and a reduction in intra-familial support. Acculturation based literature in this area importantly provides insight into the types of familial conflict that Southeast Asian refugee parent's face when attempting to re-establish family roles in an unfamiliar socio-cultural environment (Yoonsun et al., 2008).

### **Social Support in the Parenting Role**

Families are central in the lives of parents who are refugees and isolation from such supports has increasingly been shown to threaten the integrity of a traditionally collectivist culture, by which the strength of the family relies on the wellbeing of its members (Tingvold

et al., 2012). The Southeast Asian family is typically described as a strong extended kinship unit (Tajima & Harachi, 2010; Tingvold et al., 2012). Despite this, and somewhat surprisingly, the main research focus on how Southeast Asian refugee parents and their families acculturate has primarily been at the nuclear family level. Hence, the role of extended kin networks in supporting refugee's parents, or how in the absence of such networks refugee families are impacted, has remained a relatively unexplored field (Tingvold et al., 2012). However, Lewig et al., (2012) suggests that the loss of support from extended family greatly contributes to parent's social isolation and exclusion from the wider community.

Specifically, findings from Lewig's et al., (2012) research highlighted that refugee families reported experiencing a number of challenges when parenting in the absence of social and other supports that were previously available in their home countries. Specifically, separation from extended family was found to be a key contributor to feelings of social isolation and loneliness, placing added stress on parents adjusting to their new culture. This was particularly salient for Southeast Asian cultures where family issues are traditionally kept within the family. Similarly findings were further paralleled in research by Tajima and Harachi (2010), who also found that for Cantonese refugee parents, the loss of social structures and extended family networks that previously supported their parenting practices was particularly difficult in a new culture where such parenting strategies were questioned.

Evidently, the link between perceived lack of social support and social isolation is of particular relevance to refugee parents who in most cases have become separated from extended family as a result of forced migration. It is therefore likely that adjusting to parenting in a new cultural context would be considerably challenging given the central role of extended family in providing support and validation to parents. Such isolation from extended family and friends means that refugee parents, particularly mothers and their

children may seek support from external agencies, and such support networks can be accessed at organisations such as playgroup.

### **Facilitated Playgroup as a Protective Resource for Refugee Families**

Considering the types of support programs available for refugees arriving in Australia, child care services, more specifically facilitated playgroups, have increasingly been identified as instrumental environments targeted toward assisting isolated refugee families, particularly mothers and their children (Dolan & Sherlock 2010; Zika, 2007). Facilitated playgroups are directed by a paid coordinator, and comprise of a group of women and their children, who regularly gather to play in a supportive environment (Jackson, 2006). The growth of facilitated playgroups is linked to an emerging understanding about the significance of the family environment, of community linkages, and of family support and participation (Oke, Stanley & Theobald, 2007; Plowman, 2006; Targowska, 2011). This is particularly relevant for at risk, refugee families who have encountered cultural dislocation (Jackson, 2006).

There is paucity in Australian research on the facilitated playgroup experience and its role in establishing support for refugee mothers. However, literature that is available shows facilitated playgroups offer a safe and positive environment for refugee mothers to interact with their child and learn about mainstream childrearing norms (Zika, 2007). For example, one recent study in Sydney found that refugee parents involved in playgroups noted increases in their children's confidence and better parent-child connectedness (Jackson 2006). Furthermore, findings showed that these parents displayed greater self esteem and a reduction in feelings of isolation. The author highlighted that playgroup becomes a validating experience for refugee mothers whose parenting role has been challenged by mainstream society. Supported Playgroups enable refugee families to learn more about their surrounds and make vital community links through the availability of practical information and resources (Jackson 2006).

In addition, research by Targowska, Guilfoyle, Teather, Fernandez, (2011), aimed to assess the role of facilitated playgroup in establishing social capital and support for newly arrived migrant and humanitarian entrant families. A key finding of the evaluation related to mothers reporting on the ways facilitated playgroup had assisted them with parenting skills and improved family life overall (Targowska et al., 2011). Particularly, mothers reported on the usefulness of being able to observe the playgroup staff's interactions with children. These observations often resulted in the adoption of new parenting strategies, which was suggested by the mothers to greatly improve relationships with their children and husbands. The newly acquired skills also empowered women and increased their confidence in responding to the expectations of mainstream society.

Evidently, facilitated playgroup can be considered a central component of holistic family services that can greatly assist in socially supporting refugee mothers in the context of cross-cultural adaptation and understanding (Targowska et al., 2011; Zika 2007). However, despite the importance of facilitated playgroup services, there remains a gap in research on how such playgroups, as a social support resource, relates to the refugee parenting experience, particularly from the perspective of playgroup mothers. It is important therefore that further research be conducted to establish the potentially beneficial role of facilitated playgroup, in areas such as parenting, to better understand the unique needs of refugee mothers.

### **Common Limitations in the Literature**

Despite the growing recognition of the challenges confronting refugee parents, existing research remains deficient in a variety of key areas (Williams, 2010). Firstly, a common limitation identified during the review of literature concerns the relative lack of research differentiating between refugees and other migrants (Williams, 2010). As research findings of Tajima and Harachi (2010) demonstrate, that while refugees face many challenges

common with other migrants, they also have unique and complex needs peculiar to their own experiences. It is therefore necessary to explore refugee groups as a separate category, which would facilitate a more accurate understanding of all the factors relating to their experiences of parenting in a new cultural context. Secondly, despite the myriad of adjustment challenges discussed earlier that are encountered by Southeast Asian refugee parents, which are often compounded by lack of personal support networks and social isolation, research continues to remain scarce. Even less is understood about the distinctive gender-based experiences of these tensions, necessitating further exploration. For the benefit of refugee parents from traditionally collectivist, Southeast Asian backgrounds, it is important therefore to further explore their experiences of childrearing within an Australian context. In addition, further research aimed at exploring the role of community based services, such as facilitated playgroup, through which refugee parents can be successfully supported in their parenting role is paramount.

### **Rationale**

The present study aims to qualitatively explore the lives and experiences of parenting amongst a group of Burmese refugee mothers, and how they perceive facilitated playgroups assist them in their parenting role. Based on a review of the literature, the challenges associated with negotiating between traditional and host country parenting norms, in addition to experiences of settlement support in the parenting role will be explored from the perspective of this group of Southeast Asian mothers, who are currently attending a facilitated playgroup. An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to provide mothers, with an opportunity to voice their experiences, and ascribed meaning of raising children within a new cultural context. The use of qualitative approaches was considered advantageous for illuminating the complexities and true essence of these women's experiences. Therefore, the research question is "how do Burmese refugee mothers in a

facilitated playgroup, ascribe meaning to experiences of parenting in a new Western Australian cultural context?"

## **Research Design**

### **Methodology**

A social constructionist epistemology was used, which places emphasis on culture and context (Liamputtong, 2009). Within this, an interpretive phenomenological approach was adopted, drawing upon theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism. The interpretive phenomenological method is grounded in the study of individuals understanding and interpretations of their experiences in their own terms (Hein & Austin, 2001; Smith, 2004). Suitably, the theoretical framework of phenomenology relates to understanding how individuals process experience in their everyday lives (Spiegelberg, 1982). In addition, symbolic interactionism is a framework that places importance on the essence of subjective meanings individuals ascribe to these experiences (Patton, 2002). Finally, hermeneutics provides a framework for interpretive understanding, placing emphasis on context (Heidegger, 1962). Together, this chosen methodology and combined theoretical frameworks allowed insight into the personal understandings of refugee mothers, and importantly focused on how these mothers interpreted and attributed meaning to their everyday experiences of parenting.

The choice of methodology was determined by the need to understand and reconstruct refugee mother's perspectives of parenting within the social context of playgroup. In keeping with a constructivist perspective, this methodology provided the means to generate rich qualitative data that illuminated Burmese mother's experiences of parenting and role of playgroup in supporting this. Further, this methodology enabled exploration of relationships within the playgroups and the interfaces between the groups and other systemic structures that affected experiences of refugee parenting. Finally, this methodology provided the means

to give substantial voice to the Burmese mothers and to make interpretations of data based on specific contextual detail. In applying an interpretative phenomenological methodology below, it is argued that theoretical rigour has been developed, in that a consistent and congruent framework has been followed in relation to the epistemological position, theoretical frameworks, methodology, and set of methods.

### **Participants**

9 Burmese refugee mothers participated in the present study. Drawn from purposive sampling, a homogenous sampling technique was used, via the deliberate selection of Burmese mothers who have specific knowledge or experience in the context of refugee parenting (Conroy, 2008). Homogenous sampling was chosen as the research question being addressed was specific to the characteristics of a particular group of women who share a common background, and culture (Liamputtong, 2009). Specifically, all mothers identified as Burmese, sharing collectivist cultural interests and similar histories of pre-migration war and conflict. In this way, theoretical rigour is evident, as the strategy of homogenous sampling is a method shared by hermeneutic phenomenology and therefore considered congruent with the research's underlying epistemological and theoretical framework.

Recruiting of Burmese mothers was initiated in collaboration with playgroup staff as a centre managed by Save the Children Organisation. This program incorporates a facilitated playgroup model. In an attempt to assist with the integration of humanitarian entrant families, the playgroup encourages mothers over the age of eighteen to engage in play and early learning with their children aged 0-5 years. An observation made regarding playgroup dynamics was that a large proportion of mothers and children attending this facilitated playgroup were identified as Burmese or of Southeast Asian descent. Burmese Mothers who were regularly attending the facilitated playgroup program were recommended by staff based on the considerable difficulties they were experiencing with parenting, and ability to provide

a typical, in-depth interpretation of these experiences. All mothers had children between the ages of 0 and 5, and over half of these women also had older, adolescent children.

In addition, two playgroup staff were included as a vital method of method of triangulation, and provided a validating perspective on Burmese refugee parenting. By gathering a validating perspective of mothers parenting and playgroup experiences, it is argued that the credibility and authenticity of the research is enhanced, further testifying that research findings can be trusted. The bi-cultural staff member was also recruited as an interpreter to assist with the translation of Burmese mothers responses throughout focus group discussions and individual interviews. Finally, an allied external stakeholder was also recruited for participation in the study. The inclusion of this service provider enabled further verification of what the Burmese mothers had disclosed about their refugee parenting experiences, enabling more rich data to be obtained and a comprehensive picture to validate the meanings mothers gave to their experiences.

### **Materials**

Prior to participation, an information letter was provided to Burmese mothers, playgroup staff and external agency staff in both oral and written format (see Appendix A, & B). Following this, an informed consent document was disseminated in both oral and written format, to those willing to participate, which included mothers, playgroup staff and external agency staff (see Appendix C, & D). The focus group interview schedule for Burmese mothers consisted of six questions characterised by everyday communicative interaction around experiences of parenting (see Appendix E). Informed by previous literature, these open-ended questions covered issues around childrearing orientations, practices and support in the parenting role. Similarly, the semi-structured interview schedule was characterised by open-ended questions, designed to encourage in-depth responses on the challenges and experiences of parenting among Burmese refugee mothers, and the role of playgroup in

supporting mothers in this role (see Appendix F). An example of a question that was asked includes “What has been different or hard about parenting here?” Similarly, the semi-structured interview guide for playgroup staff and external agency staff was also designed to encourage (see Appendix G). Multiple probes were used where necessary to allow for elaboration and further exploration into key areas of interest.

To ensure accurate recall of responses during the data analysis phase, a portable audio recorder was used. This is said further enhance the credibility of the research by ensuring truthful and authentic representations of the mother’s experiences. The researcher also made use of extensive note taking, and reflexive journaling throughout the entire research process (see Appendix H). This reflexive practice incorporates a double hermeneutic, recognising the reciprocal nature of interactions between researcher and respondent, whereby insight relies on an integration of interpretations of researcher and informants (Smith, 2004). In this way, interpretive rigour can be built by enabling a more comprehensive insight into the experiences of informants and researcher (Kitto, et al., 2008)

### **Procedure**

Evaluative rigour was well established in that the ethical components of the research were substantially addressed (Kitto et al., 2008). Following ethics approval from the Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee, the researcher liaised with the It Takes a Village playgroup coordinator and staff, who agreed to assist with the recruitment of Burmese mothers. This process enabled the opportunity to approach Burmese refugee mothers, who are often an inaccessible and consequently understudied population (see review above). As suggested by the agency, the primary researcher spent sufficient time volunteering initially at the playgroup prior to the collection of data. This enabled the establishing of rapport and lead to development of a meaningful relationship between researcher and potential informants. In addition, the observations made at playgroup provided an opportunity to gain a better

understanding of the context of mother's experiences at playgroup. It is during this early phase that Burmese mothers and agency staff were provided with information and consent forms regarding the research in both oral and written format. These documents outlined the aims of the research, interview process and voluntary nature of participation in the project. Distributing this information early allowed informant's adequate time to ask any questions, and consider their participation prior to commencement of the study. Finally, prior to data collection with the Burmese mothers, interview questions were checked with playgroup staff to ensure cultural appropriateness, and necessary changes were made based on this feedback. For example, the cultural worker advised of the preference for using the ethnic term Burmese, as opposed to Myanmar.

Subsequent to confirmation of informed consent, including that of recording and assurance of confidentiality of information, a focus group involving Burmese refugee mothers was initially carried out. In collaboration with playgroup staff, the initial use of a focus group was considered the most culturally appropriate method as it provided a safe space for the collective sharing of experiences. Specifically, the cultural worker advised that the use of the focus group would provide a supportive environment for discussion among mothers who would be more likely to talk openly because of their shared experiences. Echoing this, several authors have demonstrated that focus groups are particularly suitable for gathering information from marginalised or hidden populations, such as refugees, as informants may feel more comfortable discussing issues with others who may share similar experiences and views (Ruppenthal, Tuck & Gagnon, 2005; Vincent et al., 2006; Wellings, Branigan, Mitchell, 2000; Williams, 2010).

The focus group took place at the playgroup, at a time suitable for mothers to further ensure comfort and convenience for each informant in a supportive, non-threatening environment. As all informants presented with limited or no English, informed consent,

including the use of audio recording, was gained in the presence of an appointed bilingual interpreter who was highly trusted by the mothers. In terms of confidentiality, informants were assured that no link between the data and their identity was to be documented (Liamputtong, 2009). The focus group lasted approximately one hour. Throughout the duration of the focus group, the bilingual interpreter remained present to assist with translation of the mothers responses. This also enabled the collection of data to be gathered in a culturally sensitive manner by creating a supportive environment for the mothers to openly share their experiences.

Following the focus group, semi-structured individual interviews took place with four mothers who had been previously involved in the focus group and expressed their desire to the researcher to continue with participation. Further, an additional five mothers volunteered to participate in the interviews, and clarified that the reasons they were unable to participate in the focus group discussion related to their children being ill and not because they did not feel comfortable discussing issues of parenting. This use of methodological triangulation, whereby both focus groups and interviews were used in the data collection process involving mothers, is argued to have strengthened the credibility of the research, by helping to validate and generate additional evidence in support of subsequent claims. Specifically, similar findings emerged from the use of these different methods which is argued to enhance the truthfulness and credibility of mother representations of realities.

Interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes. Mothers articulated their lived experiences of parenting in depth enabling rich data to be obtained (see Appendix D). The interviews were again performed in the presence of the bilingual interpreter for the purposes of translating responses and ensuring maximum support for the mothers was established. It is acknowledged that some research suggests that the use of an interpreter who is known to informants may impact upon the data obtained in the way of demand characteristics (Wallin

& Ahlstrom, 2006). However, given the vulnerability of the population under investigation, research also supports the use of a known interpreter from a similar cultural background to assist with the provision of a supportive environment for informants, and restoring any power imbalance throughout the interview process. Data collection and analysis was performed simultaneously and was informed by saturation of recurring themes, characterised by no new information emerging from the interviews. This became evident after 9 interviews.

Next, semi-structured individual interviews were firstly carried out with staff. Such interviews had been previously arranged and a time, date and venue that suited each informant and ensured maximum convenience and comfort. Interviews lasted between 25 and 40 minutes each. The information obtained allowed for an initial insight to be gained with regard to the staff's own understanding of Burmese refugee parenting, and the role of playgroup in supported such experiences. More importantly, the gathering of this information was to be later drawn upon to further validate the mother's experiences of parenting and used to strengthen the credibility and rigour of the study (Liamputtong, 2009).

Finally, an opportunity arose throughout data collection to interview an external stakeholder. Playgroup staff made contact with a kindergarten teacher who was able to further qualify the information provided by refugee mothers. This interview similarly took place at a previously arranged time and location suitable for the informant, and lasted 30 minutes in duration. The information provided included some valuable new insights based on the informant's experiences of working with Burmese mothers in a refugee parenting context. Throughout all interviews, the researcher engaged in constant verification processes to ensure that their understandings of responses accurately reflected the intended meanings of informants. Upon completion of all interviews, informants were debriefed according to their individual needs by allowing any questions to be asked, and then thanked for their participation.

To support a rigorous data analysis and process of interpretations, the primary researcher engaged in an ongoing reflexive practice of journaling and note taking, from the commencement of their time at the playgroup, until the completion of data analysis.

Following transcription, all audio recordings were erased, and data was stored in a secure facility that only the researcher could access. The data, including all electronic and hard copy forms will be destroyed following a period of five years.

### **Analysis**

The present research utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] aimed at exploring the mother's life world and personal experience by examination of the themes of meaning within texts (Conroy, 2008; Smith, 2004). Throughout the total process of analysis the practice of reflexivity was employed by way of journaling, importantly strengthening interpretive rigour. Commencing at data collection and continuing throughout data analysis, the researcher described, clarified and documented their own experiences which were later drawn upon to shape and corroborate subsequent interpretations. This form of reflexivity is argued to support the integrity and nature of the research findings (Kitto et al. 2008).

Data analysis began with the researcher listening to each recording several times to gain a better sense of the meanings informants ascribed to refugee parenting (Smith, 2004). Following this, focus group discussions and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim. A conscious effort was made to conserve and respect informant's conversational style, to maintain any hidden meanings and ensure accurate reflection of the voices, perspectives and experiences (Jones, 2004). Transcripts were then read and reviewed regularly to gain an overall awareness of the texts, facilitating continued immersion in the data as suggested by Crotty (2003). Any feelings or thoughts on the researcher's behalf that emerged throughout this process were journaled. This fluid, dynamic approach to data immersion, inclusive of

reading, reflecting, reviewing and subsequently re-visiting past literature is referred to the hermeneutic circle (Smith, 2004).

Next the researcher began to identify noteworthy and meaningful statements, sentences and concepts, paying particular attention to specific words or metaphors used by informants (Smith, 2004). This process of IPA enabled an increased understanding of the lived, refugee parenting experiences of Burmese mothers. These emergent formulated meanings were then grouped into central themes and subthemes and subsequently incorporated into a complete depiction and representation of the phenomenon under investigation. Direct quotes from informants were included in support of the relevant themes identified. In a validation method known as triangulation, the final picture of the Burmese refugee experiences of parenting, and role of facilitated playgroup in supporting this was checked against the researchers journaling.

The final phase of the IPA involved processes of member checking where informants were approached a second time and provided the opportunity to validate the interpretations made. Importantly, this further developed the procedural and interpretive rigour of the research (Kitto et al., 2008). Member checking was achieved by face to face review with five Burmese mothers, again involving the use of the cultural worker interpreter, and one playgroup staff member. No new data emerged.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

The Burmese mothers in the present study provided rich and meaningful accounts of their experiences with parenting and the role of facilitated playgroup in supporting this. The women articulated an emotional discourse which expressed tensions they experienced with negotiating parenting in a new cultural context.

Derived from twelve verbatim transcripts, 22 significant statements capturing the essence of Burmese refugee mothers lived experiences of parenting and the role of supported

playgroup in assisting women with negotiating parenting were identified. The associated meanings ascribed to these statements revealed five major themes and sub-themes emerging as an interpretive framework for guiding the discussion of the research question (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Mothers Experiences of Parenting and Facilitated Playgroup Themes and Sub-themes*

Themes	Sub-themes
Meaning of Parenting	Importance of Family Value of Respect Socialisation Goals
Tensions between Mainstream and Traditional Parenting Practices	Physical Discipline Re-negotiation of Power and Control Perceived Role of Government
Negotiating Family	Changing Roles of Children Language Acquisition and Cultural Continuity
Lack of Informal Supports in the Parenting Role	Absence of Extended Family Networks Isolation and Loneliness
Benefits of Facilitated Playgroup	Opportunities for Socialisation Formal Support Opportunities to Build Informal Support Personal Relatedness and Shared Values

### **Ascribed Meanings of Parenting**

For Burmese mothers, parenting was ascribed meanings related to the values, beliefs and goals that guided them as parents. Their constructions of reality were attributed to cultural background and traditional customs. Three sub-themes emerged relating to the importance of family, value of respect and socialisation goals.

**Importance of family.**

The importance of the family was a key theme valued by all mothers and their ascribed meaning of parenting. For mothers, family was described as all relational members, inclusive of both immediate and extended kinship systems. Parents desired their children to value relationships within the family and also be conscious of family obligations. One mother connected her values to parenting as a form of ‘teaching’:

*To me, family is the most important thing. My parents taught me to behave well and listen to parents so that's what I try teach my child. I hope to teach my child their place in the family. My children are told that if you respect your family and are caring to them, they will always help you in return*

Like Ochocka and Janzen, (2008) found, for Burmese refugee mothers in the current study, parental values such as the importance of family and contributing to family life were heavily influenced by the role models of their own parents. These traditionally collectivist parenting value of family shaped the values they hoped to instil in their children. In addition, mothers were clear in highlighting that obligations within the family were balanced with an understanding of the reciprocity among members.

**Value of respect.**

The value of respect was also commonly discussed amongst mothers as a cultural concern which parents held deeply. Mothers felt it was their role to pass this value on to children by instilling the importance of being respectful of others. Specifically, respect for parents, family members, elders and teachers were frequently mentioned. Being respectful of others was considered to be the foundation for what comprises a good member of the family, and a good citizen overall. However, the word respect seemed to mean acknowledging and submitting to the authority of older individuals. One mother constructed the meaning of respect as:

*When they [children] are talking to other people, especially older people, I teach them to not talk to loud and not to answer back to adults.*

Thus, it clear that mother's construction of what parenting involves is further linked to teaching her children the high values placed on respecting others.

### **Socialisation goals.**

Many mothers made reference to the importance of their child becoming well socialised, which they said were heavily influenced by cultural background and traditional customs. For these mothers, it was their role as a parent to instil in their children values of obedience, politeness and compliance. But these cultural-sanctioned goals were often in conflict with perceived differences in mainstream childrearing norms. One mother said:

*As a parent we teach the children to behave well and listen to the parent. We want the child to obey and grow up in a decent way, but here [in Australia] I don't know how to teach the children. My parents taught me to behave well so that's what I try teach my child, but it is different in Australia so I feel very lost.*

Critically, this mother feels a sense of uncertainty in her parenting role and abilities to socialise her child as a result of differences between traditional and host country norms. Thus, cross-cultural differences were recognised by the mothers in the socialisation of their children, often resulting in a sense of anxiety about the impact these difference had on their ability to teach their children these traditional values. Despite their tension, mothers continued to hold onto these traditional socialisation goals that had been previously learned in their home culture.

Playgroup staff provided a validating perspective which further connected the mother's construction of parenting to her role as a teacher of traditional values. Such values similarly centred on the importance of obedience and respecting parental authority, as one staff member said:

*At playgroup, the relationship [between mother and child] is happy, and the children are often very quiet when they play, because the parents train the children to be well behaved always. They train the kids to not be loud; this is not acceptable in the*

*Burmese community. The parents say to the children not to talk to loud, not to fight and not disobey mum, this is repeated to the child always.*

### **Tensions between Mainstream and Traditional Parenting Practices**

Burmese mothers in the present study were often confronted with conflicting socio-cultural prospects: the need to maintain and protect their culture of origin, and the need to adopt mainstream culture. As suggested by past literature on Southeast Asian refugee parents, tensions played out most strongly around approaches to disciplining children. This was a controversial topic for many of the Burmese mothers, with perceptions of conflicting practices between home and host country commonly expressed.

During both the focus group discussions and individual interviews, mothers openly revealed methods of discipline as the dimension of parenting most affected following resettlement in Western Australia. It emerged from the data that the use of physical punishment, renegotiation of authority and control between parent and child, and the perceived role of government authorities, was particularly challenging domains experienced within the parenting role.

#### **Use of physical punishment.**

Tensions primarily centred on divergent approaches to discipline, namely the use of physical punishment. Despite many shared experiences in related areas of discipline, apparent differences emerged in this group when the use of physical punishment as behaviour management was considered. Although the detection and meaning of these acculturation differences based on physical discipline was complex, such differences became more apparent through the continual process of hermeneutic circling. Specifically, the researcher remained continually immersed in the data, engaging in processes of reading, reflecting, reading, and reviewing the literature (Crotty, 2003).

One group of Burmese mothers firmly believed that the use of physical punishment was the most effective method of controlling children and managing problem behaviours. However, this normative form of discipline done out of concern for the child put mothers in conflict with local norms and experiencing feelings of despair. Despite this, a desire to acculturate was clear, as one mother stated:

*In my home country I used to discipline my children by smacking. I believe this is the best way to guide my children on the right path and show how much I really care. But in Australia this is not allowed so I do not do this, but at times I feel desperate.*

Thus, although these mothers strongly supported the use of corporal punishment, they had stopped this method of discipline to reflect the norms of the host society. So while discrepancies between traditional and mainstream discipline practices represented a key problem of adjustment for these mothers, they still expressed a willingness to adjust their parenting styles in order to integrate into society.

Comparatively, another group of mothers highly supported the use of physical punishment, and continued to use this form of discipline following resettlement. These mothers spoke about their experiences of frustration, anxiety and helplessness over their perceived inability to control their older adolescent children and how the use of physical punishment was the only method they felt to be effective. Their desire to acculturate differed:

*I think I made a big mistake moving here to Australia, because it's hard to look after and manage the older children. There are too many distractions here and they [older children] don't want to listen to the parent anymore, so it's harder for me to control the children. This is why I still use smacking to try control the children, I feel there is no other way...*

These mothers who expressed stronger endorsement and use of physical punishment were also found to be experiencing greater degrees of parent-child conflict, a finding that has been evidenced in several studies (Park, 2001; Tajima, & Harachi, 2010). However critically, for those mothers continuing to use physical punishment, in addition to experiencing greater difficulties with their older children, shifting their parenting styles to reflect mainstream

norms appeared too much to bear. The use of physical punishment reflected mother's desperate attempts to maintain power as a parent and strict authority in a traditionally hierarchical family structure.

### **Renegotiation of authority and control.**

The role of discipline and parental authority were closely connected themes. For example, some mothers expressed a sense of powerlessness and frustration in their parenting role and not being able to use physical punishment as a means of controlling their children.

One mother expressed:

*With discipline, I am not allowed to smack and sometimes the children will talk back, and I don't feel like I have any control over the children. I cannot properly punish my children, and so I cannot control my children*

Further validation for this tension experienced by mothers regarding negotiations of power and control was provided by playgroup staff. For example, one staff member said this was related to control:

*Refugee mothers experience great difficulties with this issue of losing control over children, mainly to do with children answering back in Australia and the whole smacking thing. Children learn from their teacher that they have the right to say things back to the parent. Now this is not how the Burmese mothers were traditionally brought up, so this is really difficult. At the playgroup, some of these mothers try to smack the children to discipline them. But obviously here it is not ok, so in this way the parents have said they feel they don't have any control.*

Mothers reported on growing up in Burma, where their experiences of physical punishment and a one-way process of communication was the norm. Upon resettlement, mothers encountered different parenting norms that encouraged autonomy and negotiations with children. The consequences of these differences in parenting norms, which organise along collectivist versus individualist ideals, have been highlighted in several studies (Buki, Tsung-Chieh, Strom, & Strom, 2003; Tingvold et al., 2012) argue that as families play a key role in the lives of parents who are refugees, so disruption to this unit can seriously threaten the integrity of a traditionally collectivist culture.

**Perceived role of government.**

Many Burmese mothers believed that Australian law served a powerful role in the way parents raised their children, particularly with regard to discipline. The perceived government control over what constituted appropriate discipline evoked strong, emotive responses from many informants. Mothers reported feeling undermined both in confidence, but also in the parenting domain and competencies, particularly the control of children's behaviours and power. This had far reaching effects on the family structure and the mother's belief in their ability to influence other life-related decisions among children, such as enacting boundaries. One mother's sense of despair and confusion was clear:

*My first worry about parenting is that the way I look after my children is different to the Australian way, and I fear that the government will come and take them away. I love my children very much and don't want them to be taken away. Because I have lots of children sometimes they are hard to control and I don't know what to do. When they are so naughty I give them a little smack and the children say 'don't smack me, If I have a little bruise or mark I am going to tell the teacher at school, and the police will come and get you'. This really hurts me and disappoints me because the children do not listen to me.*

Evident here is the mother's tension and worry over Australian parenting norms and the role of state authorities in disrupting her traditional values of what constitutes effective parenting. In addition, she feels that the influence of the government is a serious threat to her parenting role as an authority figure and teacher of values, such as obedience and respect. Mothers felt that the restriction of corporal punishment imposed by authorities limited their ability to exert power and control over their children, further disturbing the harmony within the family. In addition, mothers experiencing the threat of state intervention and adolescents understanding and using this threat further exacerbated the tensions between the parent-child relationships.

### **Negotiating Family Life**

Negotiating family life in a new culture was another domain that significantly impacted Burmese mothers in their parenting role. Mothers were faced with tensions associated with changing family dynamics as a result of discrepancies between traditional and host country norms. Two sub-themes emerged relating to language acquisition, and cultural continuity, and the changing roles of refugee children.

#### **Language acquisition and cultural continuity.**

Mothers reflected deeply on the issue of adopting the mainstream English language and expressed concerns about how the language spoken had an impact on their parenting practices. Specifically, command of the Burmese language was considered a vehicle for maintaining cultural continuity and so it formed part of the expected behaviour of children.

For these mothers, their role as a parent was to teach this, as one mother expressed:

*The different language is a big problem. I want my child to learn English, but I also want the child to learn their home language. So in this way I don't really know how to teach my child. But its really important to me that my child knows about their own culture, and I try to teach this by making them learn the Burmese language.*

Interestingly, rather than using English as an adaptive acculturating strategy, some mothers saw the continuance of the Burmese language as an important cultural resource to support them in dealing with their new circumstances. For these mothers, insisting their children command the Burmese language enabled a sense of cultural continuity through which values could be transmitted. Mothers insisting that their children learn Burmese also appeared to serve a protective function to ensure connectedness to family members and where values and customs were communicated.

*I feel my older children particularly are forgetting their home language, and sometimes have problems understanding what I am saying to them. So I try to speak our first language at home [in Australia] so they never forget.*

Thus, mothers felt that as parents their role was to reinforce cultural traditions, where acquisition of the Burmese language was considered a vehicle to do so. Echoing this, international research by (Tingvold et al, 2012) similarly found that for Vietnamese refugees, the language of origin was considered by informants as an important means of communication that connects children to other family members, and traditional culture.

Indeed, some mothers discussed the considerable anxiety and tensions they felt regarding their child's rapid acquisition of the English language and impact this had on their identity as a parent and parent-child relationships. For example, one mother said:

*When they go to school they learn more English, so when they come home I feel I cannot teach them anything, and they don't want to listen. My child said to me 'back at home, I thought you are smarter than me, but here you don't even know English, and you don't know anything'...this hurt me very much.*

Explicit here is that language is not only a means of communication, but also a way of keeping a connection between children, and parents. She feels a sense of disconnectedness, and helplessness toward her family resulting from her child's increasing language acquisition. She expresses her desire as a parent to maintain that connection and control however feels her children are disrespecting her. She is attempting to maintain power as a parental figure, however fears she is losing control over

Similarly, Tummala-Narra (2004) suggests that the differences between pre-migration fantasies and the realities of adapting to a new country reflect the process of mourning the loss of the home country. Refugee parents often struggle with coexisting emotions of anxiety, guilt and sadness in attempting to survive within divergent cultural environments. Similarly, the Burmese mother seems conflicted about the reality of her child's acculturation. Literature recognises that one particular domain of separation from mother country that becomes prominent for many refugee families is the loss of native language and acquisition of a new language and style of expression (Tummala-Narra, 2004). Such literature has underscored the

significance of the native language as a powerful organiser of emotional and cognitive experience, considered to be one of the basic defining elements of cultural identity.

### **Changing roles of refugee children.**

Some Burmese mothers disclosed concerns, not just about language, but about discrepancies between the values and practices with which they had traditionally learned, and the perceived freedoms that their older, adolescent children were growing up with in Australia. Specifically, mothers reported experiencing feelings of disempowerment, frustration and sadness by the growing independence of their older children. One mother said:

*It's hard because I don't want my child to forget their home culture. There is definitely a difference between both cultures. At home they are obedient, but here they have too much confidence and don't want to listen to the parent, so this is very difficult.*

Mothers felt frustrated over the increasing acculturation of their children to Australian societal norms, and the disruption this had on their roles as parents to teach children about their culture. Mothers perceived the disparities between collectivist versus individualist norms as a serious threat to parental superiority which greatly undermined the traditionally hierarchical family structure.

Some mothers further elaborated on the consequences of this independence on their parent-child relationships. In particular, mothers expressed concerns of a growing detachment, and that their children were drifting away from the guidance of parents. One mother expressed:

*I expect my children to behave well and appear well dressed. But my two older girls (10 and 12 years) try to dress like Australian girls, they dress up in short skirts and people can see their underwear's. This really upsets me and I tell them this is not polite and not decent.*

Explicit here is the mother's sense of distress that her children are becoming to Westernised, and will lose the important values, beliefs and traditions of their culture of origin. Clearly, she wants her children to retain the values of politeness, obedience and

respect that they were brought up with in Burma, and to understand the importance of becoming a decent social member of the community. In support of this, one staff member stated:

*The conflict stems from older children learning to talk back to their parents, and when they [children] stop practicing traditional Burmese values. This can create conflict because the parent feels like they are losing their child and feels that their child doesn't care about these values.*

Findings of Gwatorisa's (2009) research highlight that incongruence between collectivist and individualist parenting practices can often result in conflicts between refugee parent and child, with parents trying to negotiate two, often very different, worlds. Gwatorisa (2009) suggests that there is often tension experienced over erosion of culture and values, as refugee children typically assimilate more rapidly to a Western lifestyle with regard to dressing, refusal to attend school, talking back to parents and generally becoming more independent.

### **Lack of Informal Parenting Support**

Given the tensions, and sense of confusion associated with parenting in a new culture, one of the strongest and most pervasive themes to emerge in this inquiry was the perceived lack of informal support experienced by Burmese mothers trying to cope with the challenges above, and impact of this on their parenting role. Specifically, mothers identified the considerable challenges they experienced when raising children in the absence of social and other informal supports that were previously available in their home countries. Informal support networks primarily meant those pre-existing between family, and extended kin. In Burma, family members not only provided practical assistance to mothers, but also provided social and emotional support related to the values they held so close. Two sub-themes emerged relating to this lack of informal support including the role of extended kinship

systems and how the diminishment of such supports resulted in feelings of loneliness and isolation for Burmese mothers.

### **Role of extended kinship systems.**

A common, shared experience for this group was the deep meaning and value placed on extended kinship systems as a resource of parenting support. Consequently, the absence of and separation from extended family experienced by the majority of mothers placed considerable strains on adjusting their challenged values regarding discipline, and negotiating parent-child relations. Literature highlights that in Southeast Asian, and collectivist cultures broadly, the extended family play an active role in providing informational and emotional support to parents (Gwahirisa, 2009). In this way, lack of familial and community support systems often resulted in mother's experiences of social, cultural and economic exclusion.

One mother stated:

*It's hard for me because I have no help in Australia. It's hard to make decisions for the child... At home the family and community help me with parenting, and help me to guide the child in a religious and social way. However here I don't have that and don't have anyone to turn too. I don't know how to raise my child in Australia and this is very difficult because I feel that I am not a good parent in Australia.*

This construction of reality is one of a sense of despair and sadness. The mother connects her inability to parent to her disconnection from extended family remaining overseas, who had previously represented a critical source of support and guidance for her quest of upholding tradition. Such experiences were common among the majority of mothers and often resulted in considerably less interaction and participation in the wider community because their values did not fit with the norms of mainstream society. This finding is echoed in the literature, whereby refugee parents identified loss of support networks and separation from family members as a result of dislocation to be contributing factors to their marginalisation in mainstream society (Fanning, Veale, & O'Connor, 2001).

### **Isolation and loneliness**

With such tensions around preservation of traditions, one apparent theme permeating the discourse of Burmese mothers was the perceived isolation and loneliness as a result of diminished informal support in their parenting role. These feelings were largely attributed to the absence of extended family who normally play an important role in childrearing in Burmese culture. The majority of mothers described the extreme feelings of social isolation and loneliness they felt upon resettling in Western Australia. Furthermore, mothers were concerned about the effect this might have on their children. Such experiences of diminished support in the parenting role were perceived as one of the most difficult aspects of living in a new country. In support of this, one mother said:

*I have no one here to help me, I feel sad and unhappy that I am on my own. I miss my family very much and want my family with me...I am very lonely without them. I think my children need family and friends but they don't have that here, and for me I feel very sad because I don't have family here.*

Access to such supports is considered a central coping and protective resource promoting positive psychological and social outcomes for many disadvantaged families (Kolar, & Soriano, 2000). However, Gwahirisa (2009) suggests that aside from often fragile social ties, supportive networks are typically eroded at the familial level for many refugee parents. The sadness, isolation and loneliness that succeed this, including the loss of family interaction and engagement, are considered primary contributors to the wellbeing of refugees.

### **Benefits of Playgroup**

In light of the above, playgroup was found to play an instrumental role in offering emotional and practical support to refugee mothers. When asked to discuss the role of facilitated playgroup in their parenting role, mothers provided a rich discourse about their experiences. Specifically, informants spoke about the perceived benefits for themselves in attending playgroup, which commonly centred on the provision of support for them to uphold

cultural traditions and connect with other Burmese families. Such benefits included opportunities for the socialisation of children, the availability of formal support, opportunities for establishing informal support, and personal relatedness and shared values.

### **Opportunities for socialisation**

The majority of Burmese mothers spoke about the role of playgroup in providing children with important opportunities for socialisation and interaction with others. Mothers discussed how it was important that their children learnt to share and be kind to others. For example, one mother said:

*By coming to playgroup my children can learn how to share and act properly with family and other children. By learning to share and be considerate my children will become decent people in society. So I feel it is good that my children come to playgroup and learn how to play with other children, and can hopefully make some friends as well.*

Explicit here is that the appropriate socialisation with other Burmese children enables learning of important life skills. This mother relates the ability to perform in society to the development of these socialisation skills at a young age, and that by learning to share and be respectful of others, children will grow to be decent members of the community. Although the mother expresses the desire for her child to acculturate in broader mainstream society, she feels that in order to do so the child must first learn traditional values of socialisation. In the context of parenting, mothers also discussed the important benefits for themselves in attending playgroup.

### **Formal support.**

The value of playgroup in providing formal support networks was expressed by the majority of mothers, as reflected in past literature (Jackson, 2006; Targowska et al., 2011). Specifically, the presence of formal support through participation at playgroup was identified by most mothers as a highly valued protective resource, particularly in the absence of

extended family members. For several informants this was related to individual feelings of connectedness, sense of belonging, and general wellbeing: One mother expressed:

*Back at home I have my family; I have my mum, my cousins, my children. In Australia playgroup is my second family. My family [at home] helps me by looking after my children, and by coming to playgroup my children are also looked after.*

For these mothers, the formal support networks established at playgroup, particularly relationships with staff mirrored the supports previously provided by extended family in their country of origin. The provision of this type of support assisted mothers with their tensions over erosion of culture by contributing to a sense of continuity where traditional values, specifically the importance of family, could be upheld. Despite this, more than any form of support, opportunities for emotional help through informal networks was most appreciated and identified as lacking for many mothers (Kolar, & Soriano, 2000).

### **Opportunities for networking with other Burmese mothers.**

As highlighted previously, lack of Informal support, particularly in the absence of extended family, was apparent, and greatly contributed to mothers feelings of isolation and loneliness. However, the opportunities to better establish such informal supports, particularly through attendance at playgroup and development of friendships with other Burmese families was highly regarded by most mothers. One mother spoke about her hope for establishing such supports, and how further involvement in playgroup would assist her with this:

*It's good that my children come to playgroup and learn how to play with the other children, and can hopefully make friends. Hopefully I can make some friends also. At my house [in Australia] I am so lonely, but coming to playgroup makes me feel part of a family*

Evidently, the increasing development of informal friendships with other Burmese families, provided mothers with the opportunities for both social connectedness and preservation of tradition in the context of their parenting role, decreasing feelings of isolation and exclusion. The mother attributes a sense of belonging to the networks she has with other

Burmese mothers. Echoing this, the provision of this type of social, informal support is reflected within the literature as most wanted by many parents, however continues to remain lacking in many formal parenting programs (Rullo & Musatti, 2005; Vandenberg et al., 2009).

The importance of formal and informal social networks has been well recognised within refugee literature as a protective resource contributing to individual resilience and mental well-being. Notably, the findings from the present study further accentuate this, underscoring the benefits and value of facilitated playgroup for refugee parents.

### **Personal relatedness and shared values.**

Participation in playgroup assisted Burmese mothers in their parenting role by enabling a sense of belonging and shared emotional experience. Evidently, playgroup provided an environment where mothers felt they could parent in a way that reflected their cultural values, but also provided them with opportunities to validate and discuss their experiences of parenting with other Burmese parents. One mother said:

*I get lots of help when I come to playgroup, as I have friends, and my children have friends, and I feel relaxed and enjoy meeting the other parents. I have a good experience about parenting here, where my friends will talk about parenting, and this helps me very much.*

According to McMillan and Chavis's (1986) model of sense of community, group membership relates to a sense of belonging or feeling of personal relatedness. In the context of the present study, this sense of belonging and identification, primarily with other Burmese mothers appeared centred on experiences of connectedness, bonding, and acceptance within the group.

Shared emotional connection relates to the understanding that members share history, values and similar experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). These perceptions of personal relatedness were highly valued by all Burmese mothers attending playgroup.

*I feel part of the family at playgroup because I feel that I am not alone. Looking after my children can be sometimes...very hard...but coming to playgroup I see that I am not the only one*

Thus, interactions with other Burmese mothers who share a similar history and experience has contributed toward group cohesiveness and therefore strengthened mother's sense of community. Echoing this, McMillan, & Chavis (1986) model recognises that when individuals who share values and history join together, they find that they also share similar needs and goals, thus fostering the idea that joining together will better enable the satisfaction of those needs and reinforcement they seek. In this way, shared values amongst Burmese mothers provided an important foundation for an integrative cohesive sense of traditional community.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore and better understand the experiences of parenting among a group of Burmese refugee mothers, and the role of facilitated playgroup in assisting mothers in this role. Such qualitative research is critical for the development of rigorous evidence which provides a bridge between knowledge and practice. In relation to the research question, this qualitative inquiry has highlighted the subtleties, complexities and ascribed meanings of parenting among Burmese refugee women, in one Australian context. It showed that there were multi-faceted and unique factors influencing the mother's experiences of raising children in a new unfamiliar cultural context. In addition, this study further highlights the role of facilitated playgroup in providing and establishing support for these mothers with regard to negotiating parenting in a new cultural environment.

The meaning of parenting commonly discussed by mothers was heavily influenced by culture and characterised by their desire to hold onto traditional values, and goals that guided them when raising their children. Within this, mothers provided a sophisticated and emotional discourse of the high values placed on teaching their children the importance of family,

respect for elders, and appropriate socialisation. Mothers also discussed the tensions associated with discrepancies between mainstream and traditional parenting practices. Such tensions were found to primarily relate to differences in normative approaches to discipline, and negotiating family, both of which were characterised by a strong desire to maintain cultural continuity. Lack of support in the parenting role, particularly in the absence of extended family members further comprised a key finding in the present study. Finally, the provision of parent support was a highly significant element of the supported playgroup. Participation at playgroup was found to provide support with dealing with parenting tensions, greatly assisting mothers with maintaining traditions and a sense of cultural continuity.

As the study only focused on refugee families residing in the Perth metropolitan area, it is possible that the experiences of parents resettled in other regional areas would be different as a result of potentially greater social and geographic isolation, and limited availability of support programs. It would be interesting to investigate such differences from the perspectives of refugee parents living interstate or other areas of Western Australia. In addition, as the study obtained validating information from the perspective of only one stakeholder, it is possible that including the views of additional community members working closely with refugee families would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges parents encounter, and ways in which to support them.

Despite these limitations, the findings from the research are important in several respects. The present study addresses a notable gap within existing literature by further highlighting the complex and unique needs of Southeast Asian refugee mothers resettling in a new cultural context. Specifically, the Burmese mother's acculturation into Australian life was characterised by multiple hardships in the parenting role which primarily centred on a strong desire to preserve tradition and culture. Comparatively, the provision of supportive resources to refugee mothers, like facilitated playgroup, has been shown to produce a

compounding impact in a positive direction. Specifically, such social support can serve as a buffer for refugee mothers trying to negotiate parenting often between two very different worlds, by providing them with a sense of empowerment, validation, and control in their parenting role. In light of this, it is suggested that the successful adjustment of Southeast Asian refugee parents appears more probable where traditions such as cohesive family structures and obligations are preserved, but where parents also allow for a degree of flexibility to deal with changes in their new socio-cultural context.

It is acknowledged that that policy initiatives and support services aimed at enhancing parental competence require sensitivity to the factors that can promote or undermine parenting in different cultural contexts (Kolar, & Soriano, 2000). Such factors are particularly relevant in Australia, given the cultural diversity of its families. However, there continues to be limited understanding about the everyday experiences and concerns that parents in different circumstances, including refugee mothers, are confronting when child rearing, importantly necessitating future inquiry (Kolar, & Soriano, 2000). In addition, as the parenting roles of refugee mothers have been shown to be greatly influenced by both culture and context, there is a need for future research and Australian resettlement organisations to better assess refugee parenting from a gender based perspective to enable successful gender-based integration. Importantly, it is suggested that cultural knowledge informs such service providers about the unique refugee parenting context when working with these families and their children (Williams, 2010). Thus, the continued exploration of ways to better establish supports for refugee families, can potentially alleviate some of the tensions experienced by parents as they “walk an ideological tightrope” between traditional parenting learned from their home country, and the prevailing norms of the host society.

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Appendix A

Information Letter for Refugee Women



Chief Researcher: Beth McLaughlin  
Email: [bmclaug2@our.ecu.edu.au](mailto:bmclaug2@our.ecu.edu.au)  
Phone: 0421233346  
Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle  
Email: [a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au](mailto:a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au)

## Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in Playgroup

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a study on parenting and the role of playgroup in supporting this. The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of parenting among Burmese refugee mothers in playgroup. You have been selected based on your ability to give an in-depth overview of your experiences. You are asked to firstly take part in a group discussion with other Burmese mothers. A Cultural worker will be present here. Then, for those willing, individual interviews will be carried out. A Cultural worker will also be present here. Participants are only expected to take part in study as they feel comfortable, answering questions from the researcher, and talking about their experiences in relation to parenting and playgroup. If you choose to take part in the study, please sign the consent form which will be provided to you.

It is expected that taking part in the group discussion may take about 1.5 hours of your time, and possibly a further 40 minutes for a later interview. It is also expected however, that you may benefit from taking part in the study, by talking about your experiences in relation to parenting. This study allows you to be given a 'voice' and to be 'heard'. It also provides the chance for a better understanding of the issues refugee mothers may experience in Australia, and how service providers can help in dealing with these.

Discussion groups and interviews will be audio recorded. Information gathered will then be looked over by the researcher, to find common themes that may reflect the experiences of refugee mothers. Only the researchers listed on the ethics application will be able to see the information gathered. To maintain confidentiality, the main researcher will keep all information in a secured cabinet at Edith Cowan University, until the research has finished. Information will be kept here for a five years following publication of the report, and will then be destroyed.

Findings of the research will be presented in a final report, which may be published soon after the study has finished. This report will be offered in the library at Edith Cowan University, and also given to staff of 'It Takes a Village' playgroup and relevant stakeholders. It is important to note that no identifying information will be included in this report, and therefore, confidentiality will be kept.

Please note that taking part in the study is your choice. Additionally, you may stop taking part at any time, without explaining why. If you choose to stop, any information already gathered from you will be appropriately destroyed.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researcher or supervisor for more information. Also, if you have any worries or complaints about the research, and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may talk to the following person:

Research Ethics Officer  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
JOONDALUP WA 6027  
Phone: (08) 6304 2170  
Email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au)

Lastly, please note that approval for this study has been given by ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Kind regards,

Beth McLaughlin

Chief Investigator

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2010

Appendix B

Information Letter for Playgroup Staff and External Agency Staff



Chief Researcher: Beth McLaughlin  
Email: bmclaug2@our.ecu.edu.au  
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Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle  
Email: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

## Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in Playgroup

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in a study on parenting and the role of playgroup in supporting mothers in this role. The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of parenting among Burmese refugee mothers in playgroup. You have been selected based on your ability to give an in-depth overview of your experiences. You are asked to take part in an individual interview aimed at gathering information based on your observations anything the mothers have told you with regard to their experiences of parenting. Participants are only expected to take part in study as they feel comfortable, answering questions from the researcher, and talking about their experiences in relation to parenting and playgroup. If you choose to take part in the study, please sign the consent form which will be provided to you.

It is expected that taking part in the interview may take about 40 minutes of your time. However, it is also expected that you may benefit from taking part in the study, by talking about your observations in relation to the mother's experiences of parenting. This study allows you to be given a 'voice' and to be 'heard'. It also provides the chance for a better understanding of the issues refugee mothers may experience in Australia, and how service providers can help in dealing with these.

Interviews will be audio recorded. Information gathered will then be looked over by the researcher, to find common themes that may reflect the experiences of playgroup staff and refugee mothers. Only the researchers listed on the ethics application will be able to see the information gathered. To maintain confidentiality, the main researcher will keep all information in a secured cabinet at Edith Cowan University, until the research has finished. Information will be kept here for a five years following publication of the report, and will then be destroyed.

Findings of the research will be presented in a final report, which may be published soon after the study has finished. This report will be offered in the library at Edith Cowan University, and also given to staff of 'It Takes a Village' playgroup and relevant stakeholders. It is important to note that no identifying information will be included in this report, and therefore, confidentiality will be kept.

Please note that taking part in the study is your choice. Additionally, you may stop taking part at any time, without explaining why. If you choose to stop, any information already gathered from you will be appropriately destroyed.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact the researcher or supervisor for more information. Also, if you have any worries or complaints about the research, and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may talk to the following person:

Research Ethics Officer  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
JOONDALUP WA 6027  
Phone: (08) 6304 2170  
Email: [research.ethics@ecu.edu.au](mailto:research.ethics@ecu.edu.au)

Lastly, please note that approval for this study has been given by ECU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Kind regards,

Beth McLaughlin

Chief Investigator

2<sup>nd</sup> April 2010

Appendix C

Consent Form for Refugee Women

Chief Researcher: Beth McLaughlin

Email: bmclaug2@our.ecu.edu.au

Phone: 0421233346

Supervisor: Andrew Guilfoyle

Email: a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au



## Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in Playgroup

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand and agree to the following:

- I have been given an information letter explaining the research study.
- I have read and understood the details given to me in the information letter.
- I have been given the chance to ask questions, and these have been answered
- I am aware that if I have any further questions, I am able to ask the researcher or supervisor.
- I understand what taking part in the research will involve.
  - I understand that I am required to firstly take part in a group discussion with other Burmese mothers from 'It Takes a Village' playgroup. This will take about one and a half hours, and playgroup staff, including a cultural worker, will be present.
  - I understand that if I am comfortable, I will also take part in an additional interview with the researcher. This will take approximately 40-60 minutes, and the cultural worker will again be present.
- I understand that all information given by me will be kept confidential, and that my identity will not be given to anyone without my approval.
- I understand that any information given will only be used for the research. Findings may be published in a report; however no identifying details will be included without my approval.
- I understand that I am free to stop taking part at any time, and will not have to explain why.
- I agree to take part in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix D

Consent Form for Playgroup Staff and External Agency Staff

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## Experiences of Parenting among Burmese Refugee Mothers in Playgroup

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand and agree to the following:

- I have been given an information letter explaining the research study.
- I have read and understood the details given to me in the information letter.
- I have been given the chance to ask questions, and these have been answered
- I am aware that if I have any further questions, I am able to ask the researcher or supervisor.
- I understand what taking part in the research will involve.
  - I understand that I am required to take part in an interview with the researcher to discuss my experiences and observations of Burmese refugee mothers and their parenting role.
- I understand that all information given by me will be kept confidential, and that my identity will not be given to anyone without my approval.
- I understand that any information given will only be used for the research. Findings may be published in a report; however no identifying details will be included without my approval.
- I understand that I am free to stop taking part at any time, and will not have to explain why.
- I agree to take part in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E  
Focus Group Protocol

### **Focus Group Questions for Burmese Refugee Mothers**

#### **Questions will include:**

Can you talk about some of the childrearing practices that you do as a parent?

Probe: What is important to you as a parent when raising your child?

Probe: As a parent, what are some of your expectations of your children?

What have been your experiences of parenting in Western Australia?

Probes: What has been different or hard about parenting here?

Probes: How has this affected you as a parent?

What sorts of changes have you made as a parent living in Western Australia?

Probe: If changes, can you describe how this has affected your relationship with your child?

Describe what has affected your relationships within your family?

Can you describe the ways (if any) in which playgroup has impacted upon your parenting experiences?

What sorts of things do we need to know about Burmese culture and the refugee parenting experience to best support you?

What can child care workers, educators, and other service professionals do to help you in parenting successfully?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol for Refugee Women

### **Individual Interview Questions for Burmese Refugee Mothers**

#### **Questions will include:**

Can you talk about some of the childrearing practices that you do as a parent?

Probe: What is important to you as a parent when raising your child?

Probe: What are some of the beliefs and values that guide/help you as a parent?

Probe: What are your hopes for your children?

Probe: As a parent, what are some of your expectations of your children?

What has been different or hard about parenting here?

Probes: How has this affected you as a parent?

What sorts of changes have you made as a parent living in Western Australia?

Probe: If changes, can you describe how this has affected your relationship with your child?

Describe what has affected your relationships within your family?

What kind of help do you get with parenting here?

Probe: do you have family here that help you with parenting? If so, can you describe what this is like, if not, can you describe how this impacts upon you?

Can you describe the ways (if any) in which playgroup has impacted upon your parenting experiences?

What sorts of things do we need to know about Burmese culture and the refugee parenting experience to best support you?

What can child care workers, educators, and other service professionals do to help you in parenting successfully?

Appendix G

Interview Protocol for Playgroup Staff and External Agency Staff

### Interview Guide for Playgroup Staff

#### Questions will include:

Please describe your role at the playgroup?

#### *Based on your observations, or by their reports to you:*

What do you think Burmese refugee mothers find different about parenting in their new culture?

Probe: How has this affected them as a parent?

Can you describe any culturally specific childrearing practices/values that Burmese mothers engage in.

Probe: Can you describe how these are different to Western childrearing practices

What (if any) sorts of changes do you think Burmese refugee mothers make in terms of parenting in Western Australia?

Probe: How has this affected them as a parent?

Probe: Have they redefined what they think good parenting is?

Probe: Has this caused the Burmese mothers to experience anxiety over parenting?

Probe: Has this caused the mothers to experience any conflict with their children?

Describe this conflict.

Based on your observations, how would you describe the Burmese mother/child interactions at playgroup?

Probe: Can you describe the ways (if any) in which the Burmese mother and child relationship has changed since coming to playgroup?

Are there any ways the women have adapted their parenting?

Can you describe the ways (if any) in which playgroup has impacted upon the women's parenting experiences?

What sorts of things do we need to know about Burmese culture and the refugee parenting experience to best support these parents?

What can child care workers, educators, and other service professionals do to help Burmese refugee mothers in parenting successfully?

Appendix H:  
Snapshot of Reflective Journaling

### **Snapshot of Reflective Journaling**

**3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2012**

**Observation Day 1:**

Today's objective was to observe the playgroup and how it ran, and importantly begin to develop a rapport with Burmese mothers and their children. All playgroup staff and mothers were receptive of my attendance. Although the women struggled with English, I was still able to engage with them slightly and play with the children. Mothers were shy at first, however warmed to me slowly, it was clearly evident the love they had for their children. Mothers stayed in close contact with their children, following them around everywhere and always making sure their mouths and hands were clean. I wonder whether this was a cultural influence.

**24<sup>th</sup> July, 2012**

**Observation Day 2:**

Another observation day for me, again focusing on getting to know the playgroup staff and more importantly building trust and rapport with the mothers. Given the language barriers, I began to think about how to best interact with the mothers during data collection. I was able to talk in more detail with the cultural worker regarding how data collection would proceed using her as the interpreter. Mothers again remained shy at first; however I think watching me play with the children made them feel more comfortable with me. Seeing the mothers and children sing and play with each other made me think about how they were still smiling after all of the stress and trauma they had previously experienced. Every time I asked a particular woman how she was going, she would reply "I am blessed, how are you?" This made me think about the types of resilience these women had even in the face of their pasts.

**7<sup>th</sup> August, 2012**

**Focus Group Discussion with Burmese Refugee Mothers:**

I was nervous before commencing the focus group interview and wanted to make sure the women were fully comfortable in talking to me about their experiences. The use of the interpreter was difficult at times, especially in the context of group discussions. The interpreter was made aware of the importance of relaying responses using the exact words of the women. However I was concerned that due to the use of the interpreter, some important non-verbal cues relating to various responses would be missed, and how this might impact on analysis and subsequent interpretations. It took a little while for the women to fully open up, and I wondered about the possibility of some women not fully disclosing their experiences in the presence of others. However, with the many experiences that were common amongst women I did feel a sense of the women's relief that they were "not the only ones" who were experiencing difficulties with parenting in a new culture. On the basis of responses it became apparent that parenting was a difficult task for mothers, both in the context of divergent values between mainstream and traditional culture, and also the difficulties experienced between parent and child.

**14<sup>th</sup> August, 2012**

**Individual interviews with Burmese mothers:**

Individual interviews with Burmese mothers went well, I felt as I became more and more comfortable the interviews ran more smoothly and the information obtained was richer. I also felt the interviews ran more smoothly as they were more manageable compared with focus group discussions. Again, the use of the interpreter was required. Learning about the mother's culture and experiences of parenting was a fascinating, eye opening experience, and one that could be researched and investigated for years and you still wouldn't know everything! The more I spoke with the women the more I became aware and focused on this important opportunity to tell their stories, through their eyes.

It appeared that mothers at times found it difficult to articulate what their cultural parenting values were. It seemed as though putting into words their own values was difficult as this is a concept they probably had never been asked to communicate before. There was this general consensus that parenting values are just passed down from family members, so, like most people, they take this to be the right way and don't ever question this. This made me think that in a refugee parenting context, this may be a considerable source of tension for mothers as when some of their parenting strategies are questioned in their new culture, then so are their personal values and beliefs, which must be difficult.

While there was no instance of mothers becoming distressed while talking about their experiences, I could tell that parenting was an extremely difficult thing for them, and something that really impacted upon their resettlement. I walked away from many of the interviews feeling sad after hearing about their experiences, particularly when they spoke of their loneliness and separation from extended family. The women found it difficult to seek advice on various things, mainly because they didn't have any extended family here, but also because seeking advice outside the family generally wasn't done. Made me think about the importance of creating that 'extended family' connection with something like playgroup so the women could feel comfortable sharing their problems and seeking help. I also really felt the confusion and anxiety mothers felt over not being able to discipline their children. They spoke about this at lengths and really questioned their ability to parent and did not want to look like bad mothers in front of Western people. This made me think about what we (Australians) are doing to make refugees think that their parenting is not good enough. I thought, while we may think that smacking is not appropriate, who are we to say that their way is not correct. I think it's a real shame that mainstream communities have the sort of influence to make a parent feel that they are not good at raising their children.