Engaging Female Refugees to Re-envision their Future through Slow Fashion

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To address continued sustainability concerns associated with rising waste levels in landfills, in 2007 the city of Seattle in Washington established recycling strategies through the Zero Waste Resolution. This resolution shows how people can modify their lifestyle by adopting sustainable natural cycles, including repurposing discarded materials to reduce waste (Seattle Public Utilities, n.d.). In support of the Zero Waste Resolution, a Seattle based nonprofit agency developed a year-long community program for female refugees. Washington ranks seventh among U.S. states in refugee resettlement, with its capital city being the most popular destination (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Many of the resettled refugees come from Muslim-majority countries with strong traditional customs about the role of women and clothing within society (U.S. Department of State, 2017). This nonprofit sought to promote repurposing of used clothing and textile products in the local communities by attributing value and beauty through restoration; all the while equipping the refugees with entrepreneurial skills to produce reusable soft goods. The purpose of this study was to explore how the female trainees adopted practices in support of the city’s Zero Waste Resolution, and how they transferred these practices to members of their communities.

The teaching conventions employed reflect Knowles (1968) theory of andragogy which states that adult learners are internally motivated, self-directed and use their life experiences to augment instructor led training. This theory serves as the underlying framework for this research. Qualitative methods using in-depth interviews and observations were used for data collection. Seven women were interviewed at length; they included current trainees and program administrators/ instructors. The data were analyzed using theme analysis.

Using pop-up sewing events for community outreach, female refugees served as influencers teaching sustainable practices to others within the community as they demonstrated how to repurpose used clothing and textile products. This equipped refugees with advanced sewing skills which enabled them to serve their family and community in dignified ways by preserving
their traditional garments and engaging in entrepreneurial activities which increased their income-generating capacity and overall stature.

This study supports the theory of andragogy which states that trainees are not “blank slates” when they embark on a training regimen. They bring life experiences and a variety of expectations of their instructors, into the classroom. This study showed that while most of the adult learners are largely internally motivated, self-directed and eager to use their life experiences to augment instructor led training, some would benefit from more instructor led, structured and formalized content and delivery. As the women shared their life experiences with one another, learning took place, and a strong sense of community developed which improved training outcomes while reducing feelings of isolation and depression.

References

