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Syrian Refugees in Canada Transition to Resettlement: Through the Perspectives of Housing, Income, Female Resettlement, and Mental Health

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Syrian Refugees in Canada Transition to Resettlement: Through the Perspectives of Housing,
Income, Female Resettlement, and Mental Health

A Major Research Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Political Science

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Thank you to my parents, who have raised me and given me invaluable educational opportunities. Your unconditional love and support are the reason for my success. Thank you to my husband for his support and continuous encouragement throughout this Major Research Paper.

Abstract

War, violence, and fear of persecution are three main reasons to seek asylum. Syria has been experiencing an ongoing civil war since 2011 which has resulted in the external displacement of over 6.5 million Syrians. The value that refugees bring to a nation is more than a statistic, but rather refugees help establish the growth and diversity of a nation, contribute to the economy and most importantly, they are guaranteed protection from persecution, war and violence. Asylum seekers benefit from the refugee status they gain upon entry into Canada along with the many welfare services to help their transition to resettlement. In 2015, the Canadian Liberal Party announced that they would expand Canada's refugee intake of Syrian refugees and admit 25,000 to permanently reside in Canada. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the Syrian refugee experience and identify whether the Syrian refugee transition to Canada in 2015 led to a prosperous or difficult struggle in the search for a new and meaningful life. This will be done through examining the income and housing situations. Furthermore, this paper will attempt to pursue the question of what the female Syrian refugee resettlement conditions in Canada are through the perspective of settlement programs. Finally, and how do pre-migration conditions impact the mental health conditions that Syrian refugees experience throughout their resettlement to Canada and how does that hinder their transition?

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Introduction:

War, violence and fear of persecution are three main reasons to seek asylum. Syria has been experiencing an ongoing civil war since 2011 which has resulted in the external displacement of over 6.5 million Syrians and the internal displacement of an additional 6.7 million.¹ In 2015, the Canadian Liberal Party announced that they would expand Canada's refugee intake of Syrian refugees and admit 25,000 to permanently reside in Canada. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the Syrian refugee experience and identify whether the Syrian refugee transition to Canada in 2015 led to a prosperous or difficult struggle in the search for a new and meaningful life. This will be done through examining the income and housing situations. Furthermore, this paper will attempt to pursue the question of what the female Syrian refugee resettlement conditions in Canada are through the perspective of settlement programs. Finally, and how do pre-migration conditions impact the mental health conditions that Syrian refugees experience throughout their resettlement to Canada and how does that hinder their transition?

The right to seek refuge was first established in the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This Convention was signed by 149 States and outlined the rights and freedoms given to refugees and the responsibility that signatory nations have to uphold. According to the 1951 Convention, the definition of a refugee is a person "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable

¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Syria Emergency." UNHCR. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...”.² Canada signed this Convention in 1969 and has been a successful leader in taking in refugees for the past decades. The population of Canada is estimated at 38 million according to Statistics Canada and among this population 21% are immigrants and only 11.6% of these immigrants were admitted to Canada as refugees.³ The value that refugees bring to a nation is more than a statistic, but rather they help establish the growth and diversity of a nation, contribute to the economy and most importantly, they are guaranteed protection from persecution, war and violence.

In 2015 the Canadian Liberal Party announced that if elected they would immediately expand Canada’s refugee intake of Syrian refugees and admit 25,000 government and privately sponsored refugees to permanently reside in Canada by the end of that year. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated in a news conference that “Canadians can and must do more to help Syrian refugees who are desperately seeking safety. This is about showing leadership and doing what is right as Canadians”.⁴ As promised, when the Liberal party was elected, they did indeed resettle over 25,000 government-sponsored Syrian refugees since 2015. Thousands of privately sponsored refugees were also resettled in Canada by the support of Canadians and permanent residents. Since their 2015 successful election the Liberal party has been working hard to expand Canada’s refugee intake and overall commitments to assisting the United Nations Human Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and continued to advocate for this in their 2019 Liberal

² Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees: Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of the Refugees: Text of the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees: Resolution 2198 (XXI) Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, UNHCR, 2007.

³ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census." November 01, 2017. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm?indid=14428-1&indgeo=0>.

⁴ "Liberals Commit to Leadership on Syrian Refugee Crisis: Liberal Party of Canada." Liberal Party of Canada. September 05, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://liberal.ca/liberals-commit-to-leadership-on-syrian-refugee-crisis/>.

Party Manifesto.⁵ Upon arrival to Canada, Syrian refugees were given permanent residency, orientation to Canadian culture and programs, government financial assistance and a settlement worker to assist them with their transition to resettlement. The experiences of resettlement that Syrian refugees endure impact their ability to successfully transition into Canadian life. The Canadian refugee program has been generous but also limiting when considering the cost of living in many of the Canadian cities that refugees are residing in. Further, access to housing and basic needs is underestimated by the Canadian Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) which offers monthly funding to refugees within their first 12 months in Canada.

I argue in this major research paper that the experiences of Syrian refugee's in their resettlement limits their advancements in housing, income and ability to learn an official language. The Canadian resettlement program lies on the premise that resettlement funding is suitable for refugees in Canada looking to find affordable and satisfying housing and begin their transition. I argue in chapter one of this paper that the RAP offered to Syrian refugees is limiting and constrains them from finding meaningful employment and satisfying their basic essentials including food security. I argue in chapter two of this paper that Syrian female refugees' transition to resettlement deserves unique attention as pre-migration conditions, household duties and responsibilities can impact a female's incentive to find employment and learn an official language. Furthermore, resettlement initiatives need to work on supporting Syrian female refugees and their needs through offering additional official language courses, programs to increase skills and diverse employment options to match Syrian female refugees' interests. Female refugee resettlement is deeply interconnected with their ability to manage their household, family and employment duties. In my third and final chapter, I argue that pre-

⁵ *A New Plan for a Strong Middle Class*. Liberal Party of Canada, 2015., 72

migration experiences of war and trauma can severely impact the mental health of Syrian refugees. The stigma associated with mental health is part of the reason why Syrian refugees do not seek assistance when experiencing difficulties with their mental health which I claim future deteriorate their conditions and ability to participate in their resettlement.

The architecture of this major research paper will begin with a background to address Canadian refugee policy and the reason why Canada was so eager to resettle Syrian refugees. This will be followed with a short commentary on this papers methodology and the three chapters focusing on housing and financial instability, female resettlement, and mental health within the Syrian refugee community.

Background:

Canadian refugee policy refers to the way that the Canadian government manages and determines asylum seekers requests to find refuge in Canada.⁶ Refugee policy in Canada has grown to be a common understanding between international expectations (through the 1951 Convention) and domestic laws and regulations. Refugees can enter Canada through two main routes; the first states person(s) can come to Canada on their own to seek asylum and must prove to the Immigration and Refugee Board that they deserve to be granted refugee status.⁷ The second way is through the help of the UNHCR. Asylum seekers register with the UNHCR to be resettled in any nation that is accepting refugees which allows Canada to choose from a group of pre-vetted refugees. Subsequently either of the two options lead to permanent residency in Canada. The Syrian refugees that were resettled in Canada could have been admitted through three routes; Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), Privately-Sponsored Refugees (PSR) or

⁶ "Canadian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canadian-response-to-the-syrian-refugee-crisis>.

⁷ Ibid.

Blended Visa-Office Referred Refugees. GARs are those who have been assessed by the UNHCR as qualified refugees under the 1951 Convention and their resettlement is entirely sponsored by the Canadian government.⁸ They are provided with financial government assistance “for up to one year after arrival or until they become self-sufficient, whichever comes first” through the Resettlement Assistance Program.⁹ Some of the Syrian refugees that were resettled in Canada in 2015 were GARs that were destined to one of the dozen communities supported by the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).¹⁰ The number of GARs that are resettled into Canada annually is determined by the Minister of IRCC and since this position mainly depends on the party in power, the annual goal can be modified.¹¹ PSR are individually sponsored by private citizens or community groups and are resettled to the communities where their sponsor resides. It is the responsibility of the sponsor to provide income support for the first 12 months since arrival of the refugee. There were a large percentage of Syrian refugees that came to Canada under the PSR program. According to the IRCC website, of the 44,600 Syrian refugees resettled, 21,700 were GARs and approximately 19,000 were PSR.¹² The final group of refugees that can be resettled in Canada are the Blended Visa-Office Referred Refugees; this group may be identified for resettlement by the UNHCR and “are matched with private sponsors in Canada by Canadian visa officers”.¹³ Due to their blended title, refugees

⁸ Abe Oudshoorn, Sarah Benbow, and Matthew Meyer, "Resettlement of Syrian Refugees in Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 21, no. 3 (June 06, 2019): doi:10.1007/s12134-019-00695-8), 895

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tariq Ahmad, *Refugee Law and Policy: Canada*, March 01, 2016, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/canada.php#Canada>

¹² Immigration, Refugees And Citizenship Canada. "#WelcomeRefugees: Key Figures." Canada.ca. January 11, 2021. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/key-figures.html>.

¹³ Abe Oudshoorn, Sarah Benbow, and Matthew Meyer., 895

would receive up to six months of financial support from their sponsor and the remaining six months from the IRCC through the RAP.¹⁴ This option is less popular totaling under 4,000 Syrian refugees.¹⁵ Canadian refugee policy is not only a combination of laws and regulations, but politics and the economy can also guide a governing party's decisions for refugee resettlement.

In 2015 the Liberal Party's humanitarian decision to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees was a politically thought-out choice. Joseph Garcea and Daniel Kikulwe illustrate the *justified* narrative of the Liberal Party's Syrian resettlement program. Garcea and Kikulwe pursue the position that Canada has a national obligation to resettle refugees.¹⁶ There is no doubt that since the signing of the 1951 Convention, that Canadian government has ambitiously taken steps to set out the rights of refugees domestically and made annual quotas to resettle more asylum seekers. As demonstrated earlier, the international obligations are set out initially through the universally recognized refugee definition and most importantly the norm of non-refoulement. The latter refers to the commitment that States "shall not return asylum seekers to a nation in which his/her life or freedom could be threatened" in relation to the refugee definition.¹⁷ Second, the Liberal plan was considered a Canadian national interest particularly politically and economically.¹⁸ Aside from the national obligation and humanitarian position that Canada tries to pursue, refugees do contribute significantly long-term to the Canadian economy through their skills and businesses.¹⁹ Of course, critics of this would argue that economic immigrants could also offer the Canadian

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "#WelcomeRefugees: Key Figures."

¹⁶ Joseph Garcea and Daniel Kikulwe, "The Liberal Plan for Resettling Syrian Refugees in Canada: The Justificatory Narrative and Counter-Narrative," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2019): [PAGE], doi:10.1353/ces.2019.0012), 93

¹⁷ Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees

¹⁸ Joseph Garcea and Daniel Kikulwe., 94

¹⁹ Ibid., 95

economy their skills and businesses. A true understanding of the RAP payments and the real-life testimonies from refugees on their financial status will put this justification to the test in chapter one. I would argue that in terms of Canadian refugee policy there is no denying that refugees do offer long-term economic advantages to the economy and produce future generations that will be taxpayers and increase the size of the Canadian workforce.

Garcea and Kikulwe highlight an important political interest when it comes to refugees and that is how the world views Canada. Since the early 2000's the refugee intake was steady, but not noteworthy on the world stage. The Stephen Harper Conservative government's, almost a decade of power did not establish any strong ties with the UNHCR and proved that Canada was going to continue to be restrictive in their choice to resettle those fleeing war and persecution. The Harper government introduced Bill C-31 otherwise known as the *Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act* which essentially deemed refugee resettlement acceptable from a list of *safe countries*.²⁰ This bill was troubling in many of its forms but intrinsically these *safe countries* would "not likely produce refugees" in general which defeated the purpose of signing the 1951 Convention.²¹ In 2015, Bill C-31 was challenged by the Federal Court of Canada and considered unconstitutional. When the Trudeau Liberal government was elected they made it their goal to re-establish Canada's reputation internationally as a champion of refugees and a safe haven for those fleeing persecution. In a tweet written by the Prime Minister in response to the growing Syrian refugee crisis he wrote "To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength".²² The experiences of Syrian

²⁰ "Canadian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis." The Canadian Encyclopedia

²¹ Ibid.

²² "A tale of two tweets; Canada." *The Economist*, May 12, 2018, 32(US). *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed March 12, 2021). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A538030490/AONE?u=lond953336&sid=AONE&xid=d9ed75c5>.

refugees that resettled into Canada as a result of the constantly evolving Canadian refugee policies and generous Liberal government commitment are unique and offer space for improvement.

The literature on the resettlement of Syrian refugees is not diverse in its nature and contains gaps specifically in relation to female resettlement and cases of gender-based violence. Furthermore, female resettlement is a topic that demands extensive research interconnected with pre-migration conditions. Mental health and experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are no secret to those fleeing war and persecution. Syrian refugees are the strongest examples of persons that entered Canada directly from a war-torn nation. Continuous research and studies need to fill this gap in the literature and allow for expanded resources in their field. The conversation of refuge is one that is constantly evolving and deserves the space in this major research paper to express the diverse perspectives of housing, income, female resettlement and mental health.

Methods:

The methods of this paper will be established by using primary and secondary resources to answer the research questions and pursue my arguments. Primary resources include the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada website, Statistics Canada, the Liberal Party's Syrian Refugee mandate and program. Secondary resources will predominantly be a combination of academic literature and testimonial evidence from Syrian refugees across Canada specifically those resettled in the province of Ontario.

Chapter 1: Housing and Financial Insecurity

Successful integration into Canada requires three main components. Among those include, a stable income, knowledge of at least one official language and an education. The

purpose of chapter one is to introduce the role of housing and income in transition and the components that can assist in the resettlement of Syrian refugees. As illustrated in the background section refugees entered Canada in 2015 through 3 main streams. For the purposes of this chapter, the Government Assisted Refugee's (GAR's) will hold the main focus as they are the largest group of Syrian refugees to resettle in Canada since the Liberal government's commitment. Chapter one will argue that the current Resettlement Assistance Plan (RAP) offered to refugees is not sufficient to transition into Canadian life due to the rising costs of resettlement. Furthermore, this chapter will outline the various barriers that refugees encounter when searching for employment beginning with weakness of their English skills and unacceptable foreign credentials. Finally, this chapter will seek to address the demand for Syrian refugees' skills in Canadian society and resettlement success stories.

Resettlement is not easy, and the support and guidance of the receiving government and settlement groups are extremely important to initiate a successful transition. The timeline that Syrian refugees encounter upon arriving to Canada begins with settlement workers assistance to find them temporary housing through the use of hotels or a reception house model.²³ Another primary concern of the IRCC and settlement services is that they can secure permanent housing for these refugees, in addition to finding a family doctor or dentist if needed.²⁴ After permanent housing is obtained, settlement workers assist Syrian refugees in receiving an orientation to Canadian culture and society through registering adults in either English or French language classes.²⁵ Enrolling children in school is also of primary concern for a successful resettlement

²³ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative – Looking to the Future." Canada.ca. January 21, 2019. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/welcome-syrian-refugees/looking-future.html>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

transition. The government of Canada guarantees to refugees support for their first year in Canada through the RAP. This funding comes in the form of monthly payments given to Syrian refugees to use for housing allowance and to cover costs of food, incidentals and transportation.²⁶ The amount that the Syrian refugees could receive varies depending on their family size and the province that they reside in, as every province has its own assistance rates mainly impacted by their living costs. In addition to the RAP payments, some families may be eligible for monthly child benefit payments which would have otherwise begun after the first year is completed.²⁷

Securing permanent housing for Syrian refugees remains a key priority and also a large issue for many wishing to have a smooth resettlement. Settlement workers need to find permanent homes that are within the refugees RAP budget and typically the options are limited. The Ontario RAP rates as of November 2019 for a family of four (two adults plus two children) includes \$494 allocated for basic needs and a housing allowance of \$756 reaching a total of \$1250 monthly income.²⁸ In most cities across Ontario, the latter is the cost of a one-bedroom apartment. With the increase of family size, the housing allowance grows slightly. For a family size of six persons, basic needs support is \$494 and a housing income of \$844 a month. Even considering the increase in the number of family members the RAP basic funding remains constant. The federal government also offers a maximum \$200 housing supplement in situations where the actual housing costs exceed the housing expenses.²⁹ Across Canada the RAP support increases slightly to adjust to different rental rates and living conditions. For example, in the province of Alberta, a family of four (two adults plus two children) could receive up to \$1760 a

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "RAP (Resettlement Assistance Program) Rates." Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP). Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.rstp.ca/en/bvor/rap-resettlement-assistance-program-rates/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

month in contrast to a family of six or more could receive up to \$2230.³⁰ These rates are extremely limiting for newcomer families that have to start fresh in Canada. A settlement worker offered a testimony stating “When you have low vacancy rates, landlords increasingly have the ability to choose who they want to come in, so one of the challenges we faced was convincing landlords to rent units to people with four or five children”.³¹ Settlement workers are not the only ones struggling to work with a small budget or limited housing options, but refugees themselves who are told this is their new permanent home, experience difficulty adjusting.

Abe Oudshoorn’s study on Syrian’s Resettlement in Canada offers a unique and detailed perspective on housing. Oudshoorn’s research sought to interview Syrian GAR’s that rated their housing satisfaction very low or very high on housing surveys. The interviewees introduced several key topics that Oudshoorn built off of for his study that later contributed to the understanding that housing situations are not as easy as the government may expect it to be. GAR’s have the lowest levels of home ownership and employment among the categories of Syrian refugees resettled.³² Housing and employment go hand in hand and will be discussed in further detail throughout this chapter. The allocated RAP funds delivered monthly to refugee’s bank accounts offer limited space for growth and transition into alternative housing. The rates that refugees are receiving make it difficult for settlement workers to find adequate housing and safe neighbourhoods.³³ Whether this is an indication that the Liberal government needs to increase the RAP housing allowance at least in the first year or that housing for refugees should

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rose Damaris. 2017. *Finding Housing for the Syrian Refugee Newcomers in Canadian Cities: Challenges, Initiatives and Policy Implications*. Synthesis Report. Institute national de la recherche scientifique (INRS) - Urbanisation, Culture et Société., 15

³² Abe Oudshoorn, Sarah Benbow, and Matthew Meyer, "Resettlement of Syrian Refugees in Canada,"., 895

³³ Ibid.

be better managed by the State. The situation remains that refugees are living in conditions that are not encouraging for resettlement. Syrian refugees reported cases of drug use in their buildings, bedbugs, unsanitary units and unsafe infrastructure.³⁴ One family indicated that they had to throw out all of their furniture due to bedbugs and infections. In cases of bed bugs and other emergencies some settlement workers can draw from additional funds to grant the family with some finances to find a new residence.³⁵ Safety is an important part of feeling at home, when a unit has unstable windows, doors, walls etc. this can be dangerous especially for families with young children. Oudshoorn's study reported the case of a family with an infant that repeatedly complained to their landlord about issues that they were having with their window, it was not until one day "they picked the infant from the crib, the entire window and casing fell into the apartment and smashed in the crib".³⁶ It was not until this incident that the landlord took the complaint seriously and fixed the window. Several refugees complained about the lack of housing rights that their landlords did not respect. When landlords do not respect the rights of the tenant this leaves the refugee powerless and submissive to the conditions they live in. Settlement workers see dozens of cases every month, it is a stronger burden on them to handle complaints by the tenants and to find alternative housing. Limited income forces refugees to accept their housing conditions even if they are unsafe or unsanitary and this can significantly impact their mental health and the growth of their young children. Ultimately, housing is a fundamental pillar in the transition to resettlement.

Unstable home environments can lead to depression within families and can impact their resettlement, chapter three will address mental health in more depth. Several studies across

³⁴ Ibid., 903

³⁵ Rose Damaris., 16

³⁶ Abe Oudshoorn, Sarah Benbow, and Matthew Meyer., 903

Central Canada have reported that GAR's experience stronger issues with housing than their other immigrant counterparts.³⁷ Refugees do not have many options for adequate and suitable housing. This is mainly due to their restricted income. One of the main components of successful integration as mentioned above is a stable income. The RAP benefit is allotted to refugees *only* for their first year, after which refugees are expected to either find employment to support themselves and their families or continue to accept welfare services and benefits from the government. The welfare payments will not make a refugee family in any better condition than they were with the RAP as the benefits are similar. This is where the expectations of education go hand in hand with the transition to stronger employment and income leading to eventually a successful resettlement.

During the first year of resettlement, settlement workers help Syrian refugees enroll in official language courses to better their skills in either English or French. Statistically, the IRCC reports that 89% of Syrian adults have accessed their IRCC-Funded Language Assessments and 77% of Syrian adults have accessed their IRCC-Funding Language Training since their have arrived in Canada.³⁸ English or French language courses are meant to support the refugee in their resettlement and ultimately allow them to build language skills that can help them obtain employment. This sounds like a good plan built off of careful examination of previous refugee generations, but unfortunately, this has not been an easy transition for Syrian refugees. Language skills are integral to finding employment in Canada. Only 17% of the Syrian GAR's have basic

³⁷ Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs: Experience of Syrian Refugees in Alberta, Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 20, no. 4 (December 06, 2018): doi:10.1007/s12134-018-0640-7), 944

³⁸ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Outcomes Report." Canada.ca. January 16, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/reports-statistics/evaluations/syrian-outcomes-report-2019.html>., 13

English skills and a number of them are illiterate.³⁹ The latter is of major concern as refugees are meant to transition into resettlement and begin a journey to citizenship. Without knowledge of either the official languages or ability to read or write this becomes difficult for newcomers wishing to successfully integrate into Canadian society. The official language classes offered across Canada are free and available to refugees who wish to learn English. Specifically, in London, Ontario, three community agencies assist with learning English. Those include, The Cross-Cultural Learner Centre, South London Neighbourhood Resource Centre and LUSO Community Services. These agencies offer newcomers hundreds of hours' worth of English language instruction and programs to help them learn English as a second language.⁴⁰ The demand is high within these agencies and the supply is low as learning any language is a long-term project requiring patience and commitment. Many Syrian refugees are eager to work but are on long wait lists to obtain a seat at a language service.⁴¹ Syrians are frustrated with this among other issues. A Syrian GAR complained that "In other words, we haven't learned any English until now. It is because of the long waiting time to enter the school. How can I justify this after six months? I am still in level 2 or 3! How can I justify to the government that I couldn't learn English?"⁴² While refugees are able to request the assessment of their English level, this does not mean that agencies like the Cross-Cultural Learner Centre is able to immediately accommodate them for classes. Agencies like the main three in London, Ontario are funded by the government. Additional resources are required from the Federal or Provincial government to provide more

³⁹ Sonja Senthanar et al., "Entrepreneurial Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Canada: A Feminist Grounded Qualitative Study," *Small Business Economics*, June 16, 2020, doi:10.1007/s11187-020-00385-1), 3

⁴⁰ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Outcomes Report."

⁴¹ Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs., 944

⁴² *Ibid.*, 945

services and classes. This is an investment by the government in newcomers who will end up paying this forward by applying their skills in the job market. An illiterate or low language skilled community cannot thrive for independence and give back to the Canadian economy in a sustainable way. The IRCC needs to urgently review the plans for securing additional language courses.

Many Syrian refugees have important trade, artisan and of high demand skills, but their foreign credentials limit them from acquiring employment in their field, even with English language skills. After the one-year RAP support Syrian refugees strive to obtain employment to grow their income and ultimately allow them to find alternative housing that suits their needs and increase their ability to access other basic essential services. Prior to resettlement, many refugees were under the assumption that their credentials would be transferrable and that transition into a new life would be simple by obtaining a job in their field. One Syrian refugee commented that “We asked about studying. We have a diploma and we were told that we are able to work in here. When we got here we were very surprised that we have to start studying all over again. And apply to schools and get my diploma accredited... A very long journey. However, we heard when we were in Jordan that we can work with our diploma. Nobody explained to us this properly”.⁴³ Comments like these are not uncommon. Many Syrian refugees receive their information from uncredited sources such as family or friends who may have resettled to Canada before them, which leads to false expectations or misunderstanding.⁴⁴ According to Statistics Canada those with higher education have a higher chance of having their foreign credentials

⁴³ Leah K. Hamilton, Luisa Veronis, and Margaret Walton-Roberts, *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020), 79

⁴⁴ Ibid.

recognized, but this not always the case.⁴⁵ Syrian men and women have considerably low education levels (College or University) compared to refugees from other countries.⁴⁶ Unlike immigrants, refugees do not have the opportunity to seek employment prior to landing or check if their foreign credentials are acceptable. This is mainly due to the fact that refugees do not have the luxury of communicating with employers as they are fleeing war or persecution. Women are significantly disadvantaged in the foreign credential process as “women frequently delay applying for recognition of their qualifications until their spouse/partner has completed the process”.⁴⁷ Female resettlement will be further expanded in chapter two, but it remains an important topic of discussion as long wait lists can become a hurdle in the process of credential recognition for both genders.

Syrian refugees spend a considerable amount of their RAP allowance on housing. During their first year in Canada their funds are meant to assist them in maintaining other basic needs their family may require. The IRCC will not send more money to the refugee if they spend their funds before the month is over. Budget for essentials such as food and transportation are often limited. Food insecurity is common among some Syrian GAR families. Due to the limited RAP, 23% of Syrians surveyed by the IRCC reported that sometimes they did not have enough food or money to buy more. The statistic is higher (43%) for those that reported using the food bank more than twice a week.⁴⁸ The Syrian Outcomes Report noted that availability and cost of food was a concern for Syrians and their increased desire to have food that was typical to their culture

⁴⁵ "Recognition of Newcomers' Foreign Credentials and Work Experience." Recognition of Newcomers' Foreign Credentials and Work Experience. September 29, 2010. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-001-x/2010109/article/11342-eng.htm#a2>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Jelena Zikic. *How Does Immigration Class Affect Immigrants' Experiences with Credential Recognition?* TIEDI, 2010., 3

⁴⁸ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Outcomes Report.", 11

also increased their spending on food.⁴⁹ Food insecurity is no secret to Canadians, The use of food banks across Canada is an indication that we suffer from severe inequality and income distribution.

Many Syrian GAR have been successful in obtaining employment in fields that are familiar to them. Some refugees are lucky enough to open up their own businesses similar to those they had in Syria. There are dozens of restaurants, bakeries, clothing stores and more across Canada. Khaled Al Mouktaran is just one of the hundreds of Syrians that found employment at a hotel that helped give him experience for his resume and network with other businesses.⁵⁰ Many other refugees were able to return to school and seek part time employment that helped them gain experience in their field of study. Furthermore, it has become popular to see Syrian restaurants and grocery stores across Canada that not only hire Syrian refugees but also Canadians looking for work. Other Syrian GAR prefer not to work as they believe that the government financial assistance is more than they would earn working full time at a low paying and high stress job.⁵¹ This attitude is common among many refugees that have lower education skills and are often proposed low skilled and low paying jobs that offer no sense of fulfillment for them. Darwish, a Syrian refugee's comments speak for many when he says "\$1,200 CAD/month is a very insufficient governmental assistance to cover all our needs as a family. I am not optimistic about my future in Canada, I cannot imagine myself to live here for a long

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Khaled Al Mouktaran, 'As a Syrian Refugee, I Lived in a Hotel Shelter for My First Few Months in Toronto. Now I Work There'" Toronto Life, April 21, 2021, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://torontolife.com/city/as-a-syrian-refugee-i-lived-in-a-shelter-for-my-first-few-months-in-toronto-now-im-working-in-the-same-place-during-the-pandemic/>)

⁵¹ Khaldoun Aldiabat et al., "The Lived Experience of Syrian Refugees in Canada: A Phenomenological Study," The Qualitative Report, November 2, 2021, doi:10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4334),. 486

time... my expectations about life in Canada were different than the reality”.⁵² The latter is the reality of many Syrians that resettled in Canada and are not able to meet their basic needs as a family due to the limited RAP funds, high housing and food costs. The IRCC must not forget that Syrian refugees deserve *sustainable* living conditions to successfully integrate and in turn find employment and seek further education.

The goal of resettlement is not to create humanitarian commitments that turn into welfare of fiscal burdens, but to resettle a community that was previously suffering and invest in a generation that would in turn serve Canadians. The resettlement of refugees in general offers protection and safety to those fleeing from war and persecution and new job, housing and education opportunities.

Key points from this chapter to summarize include the limited RAP funds allocated to Syrian refugees in their first year of resettlement. These funds constrain a refugee’s ability to find suitable housing and basic needs for their families which in turn can result in Syrian refugee’s experience food insecurity. Further, language courses are integral to a refugee’s transition with the understanding that learning English cannot be fully accomplished in one year. Learning English is one step towards finding suitable employment and another step towards gaining a higher income that can improve living conditions. Yes, the barriers to resettlement remain constant, but the ability to overcome them is still possible and many resettled Syrians can attest to this. The IRCC needs to increase the RAP funds to allow for increased access to more housing selections and limit the use of the food bank. With an increase RAP allowance, the use of the food bank will reduce, and families can begin to focus on learning English and gaining essential skills to enter the work force. Furthermore, settlement workers need to encourage

⁵² Ibid.

access to language classes and increased volunteering to gain work experience. Throughout this paper I continue to highlight that the path to resettlement is not easy even if others make it seem this way. Resettlement requires the work of both Canada/settlement workers and refugees themselves.

Chapter 2: Female Resettlement

Refugee's transition to resettlement is unique in all its forms. The experiences of Syrian female refugees in their transition offers an alternative perspective that the IRCC often underreports. General issues in regard to employment, income and learning one of the official languages are common among all refugees, but the perspectives of Syrian female refugees offers an insight into the struggle of single motherhood and more. Settlement agencies offer a variety of resources for female refugees looking for a successful transition into Canadian life. The work of these agencies is proven helpful and guiding. The literature available on Syrian female resettlement is limited, however, the services offered pave the path for unique testimonies and experiences that can prescribe opportunities for advancement in the current system. For the purposes of this chapter the acronym SFR for Syrian Female Refugees will be used to summarize the term. This chapter will seek to highlight the conditions of SFR resettlement and the barriers that accompany their search for stable income and meaningful employment. This chapter will identify the difficulties SFR have with accessing official language classes and finding employment in a field that interests them. Furthermore, chapter two will highlight settlement workers and their agencies perspectives on SFR and the services that are available.

The format of this chapter will begin by illustrating SFR pre-migration conditions that impact their resettlement. Arrival into Canada and barriers to language classes will follow. This chapter will address the lack of child care, household duties and employment that male refugees

do not commonly experience. Chapter two will describe the various responses women have to their resettlement experience.

Syrian refugee's pre-migration conditions vary depending on how long the refugee was displaced, either internally (within Syria) or externally. The circumstances that they endured are all unique and are unfortunately baggage that Syrian refugees carry with them to their resettlement. Nearly 80% of the refugees residing in Syria's neighbouring countries are women and children.⁵³ SFR often experienced various forms of sexual, physical and verbal harassment from strangers and even family members.⁵⁴ Displaced young women and girls have a higher chance of experiencing sexual assault and sex trafficking than those non-displaced.⁵⁵ Child marriages are also high among SFR in neighbouring nations especially during pre-migration. Many young women and girls recognize that marriage and the support of a spouse may reduce their risk of increased poverty and opt to marry at a young age.⁵⁶ There have also been many reports of parents forcing their daughters to marry older men in exchange for money.⁵⁷ The latter exposes the high rates of poverty and hardship that families experience leading them to promote forced marriages. SFR encounter various barriers to employment prior to their resettlement in Canada. Lack of education and valid work permits left SFR with poor employment opportunities and lower than average salaries. Resettlement to Canada was meant to be a breakthrough for

⁵³ Mohammed Abdel Karim Al-Hourani, Abdel Baset Azzam, and Addison J. Mott, "Sexual Harassment of Syrian Female Youth in Jordanian Refugee Camps," *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 10, no. 4.1 (November 26, 2019): doi:10.18357/ijcyfs104.1201919285), 25

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ R. El Arab and M. Sagbakken, "Child Marriage of Female Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Literature Review," *Global Health Action* 12, no. 1 (2019): doi:10.1080/16549716.2019.1585709), 6

⁵⁷ Ibid.

many families and an opportunity to transition into a new life that was less stressful than the one they had pre-migration.

Nearly half of the Syrian refugees resettled in Canada are women.⁵⁸ The role of women in resettlement is extremely important when judging the success of this transition. Many women that moved to Canada, arrived either with their family or as single mothers with young children.⁵⁹ Many of the female GAR's in Canada landed with only part of their family, for example, without their spouse or adult children. A lot of SFR have reported their strong sense of dependency on their spouses to support the family financially.⁶⁰ Sonja Senthana, Ellen MacEachen, Stephanie Premji and Philip Bigelow completed a study regarding SFR's experience with resettlement and the barriers they encountered. Among the refugees interviewed was Amine, a single mother of three adult children.⁶¹ Amine arrived in Canada with only one of her three children. She reported her feelings of anxiety and stress on her children's safety due to the separation. Amine stated that "my thoughts always here and there. It's been more than 4 years I haven't seen my children... So, my focus and my dreams is about them...I felt that my body is down...I felt that my body is not supporting me".⁶² The latter has also impacted her search for employment and ability to successfully transition into resettlement. During the first year of resettlement SFR like Amine are expected to search for housing, attend language courses, prepare to join the job market and look after their children. Often, the trauma experienced prior to migration and the separation from family members during resettlement can impact SFR overall transition and ability to successfully find employment or learn English. Amine is just an

⁵⁸ Sonja Senthana et al., "Entrepreneurial Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Canada., 576

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 583

⁶¹ Ibid., 583

⁶² Ibid.

example of the many situations that refugees still experience even after arrival to Canada.

Anxiety and stress do not suddenly disappear from these families, especially those who are separated from their loved ones.

Chapter one addressed the three main components to a successful resettlement. These components are extremely valid when it comes to SFR. Many women have reported difficulties to accessing English language classes due to the lack of child care services available to them.⁶³ SFR do not have the luxury of leaving their children with extended family when they need to go to official language classes or work. Finding employment in Canada is not as easy as many Syrian refugees anticipated prior to resettlement. Many of the SFR depended on their spouses to financially support them, but when speaking English is crucial to finding employment, many families have to decide which partner would stay home with the children and which would go on to study. In other cases, some SFR that arrived in Canada without their spouses reported stronger hardship in managing their household duties and finding employment as this has been a shift in their usual gender roles.⁶⁴ As outlined in chapter one, housing situations may not be suitable for the refugee family which increases their desire to move and the RAP payments barely satisfies their family needs. Canada is a nation that often demands a dual income, which can be difficult for many Syrian families to maintain. Families wishing to improve their lifestyle would require a higher income which is interconnected with language and demanded skills. SFR also report their overwhelming domestic responsibilities that limit their abilities to secure employment or

⁶³ Immigration, Refugees And Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Outcomes Report."

⁶⁴ Sonja Senthana et al., "Employment Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women Arriving through Canada's Varied Refugee Protection Programmes," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 3 (March 01, 2020): doi:10.1080/1369183x.2020.1733945), 576

continue language courses which are also coupled with their spouse's unwillingness to support them with.⁶⁵

Women, similar to men also experience their fair share of barriers to resettlement and the issues that arise with securing employment and limited income. Female experiences are unique due to their "double shifts" and increased struggle to find employment often as a result of limited educational background.⁶⁶ Due to SFR lack of employment references or demanded skills, their settlement workers frequently recommend that they take up volunteer positions to help them transition into employment.⁶⁷ Volunteering can be a good chance to advance skills and network within a field of interest, but it is also free labour. Many refugees do not have the luxury of donating their time to volunteer when their time could have been used to earn a living. Of course, during the period of the first 12 months in Canada, volunteering is a great opportunity to SFR that have the time and ability to manage between household duties and language courses. The Canadian 2016 Census exposed the extremely low employment rates among Syrian female refugees which sat at 9% compared to 17% of female refugees from other countries.⁶⁸ In contrast, Syrian male refugees reported employment at 24%, this is a slightly higher number in comparison to the females, but the latter does conclude that employment among Syrian refugees is generally low.⁶⁹ While nearly half of the resettled Syrian refugees in Canada are women, there is clearly a gendered divide in labour and this is commonly concluded to be because of cultural

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Sonja Senthana et al., "'Can Someone Help Me?'" Refugee Women's Experiences of Using Settlement Agencies to Find Work in Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 21, no. 1 (November 23, 2019): doi:10.1007/s12134-019-00729-1), 283

⁶⁸ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census."

⁶⁹ Ibid.

expectations and the language barrier.⁷⁰ One common comment from Syrian refugees in regard to income is that while on government support GARs earnings are deducted from their public allowance.⁷¹ In this effect, many of the Syrian refugees (including SFR) have little incentive to pursue any employment during their first year of resettlement. One Syrian refugee claimed that “it’s better for me to volunteer instead of taking money from one pocket and putting it in another”.⁷² Further, many refugees claim that they would rather volunteer than take up a low paying job that would give them the same monthly income as government welfare.⁷³ The latter provides little encouragement for SFR who wish to gain employment to secure a stronger income for their families. Employment is not only a source of income, but also the sense of pride and satisfaction.

Education and language skills can help a refugee gain meaningful employment, but when it comes to female refugees they generally experience less opportunities. SFR in particular have been reported to have low levels of language skills (9%) in comparison to female refugees from other countries (15%).⁷⁴ The statistic of Syrian men is dramatically higher than SFR sitting at 26%, which could be a result of their increased access to official language classes.⁷⁵ A settlement worker indicated that “Some of them [Syrians] were ready to learn and work, the only problem they were having the issue with, is the language. Some of them would love to go to work but it’s all the language”.⁷⁶ Bilge Ataca and John W. Berry report that newcomer women are less likely

⁷⁰ Sonja Senthana et al., ““Can Someone Help Me?”, 283

⁷¹ Sonja Senthana et al., ““Can Someone Help Me?”, 283

⁷² Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, "Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Programs., 950

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Government of Canada, Statistics Canada. "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity: Key Results from the 2016 Census."

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Sheffy Bhayee. "Perceptions of Settlement Workers on the Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees" (2019). Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository. 6104. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/6104>., 39

to speak either one of the official languages and often arrive to Canada with “lower education levels and lower literacy level which make it even harder to learn any of the official languages and increase the transition timeline for resettlement”.⁷⁷ The latter could be a result of women being under the triple burden cycle which includes caring for the household, being in charge of childbearing and trying to make ends meet.⁷⁸ Some Syrian refugee women were enrolled in post-secondary school prior to resettlement assumed that when they arrived to Canada they could learn English easily and quickly re-enroll. Hazar Najjar a SFR and aspiring computer science student explains the struggles she has with learning English despite attending the English language courses, “It was very hard...I couldn't understand anything”.⁷⁹ Official language courses as described in chapter one are experiencing high demand and low classroom supply. Long wait lists, puts dreams and ambitions like Najjar’s on hold. The settlement workers understand the struggles and hardships that some SFR are encountering and report this to their agency in hopes to amend the current program. Issues with language course availability is one that is among *all* refugees and not limited to Syrian refugees. However, for the purposes of this paper, the focus is on Syrian refugees and their struggles.

Settlement workers reflection and own perceptions on SFR transition to resettlement was illustrated through a study by Sheffy Bhayee. One settlement worker commented on the Syrian culture “The way the culture is, because of the patriarchal form of the culture, the men’s’ needs

⁷⁷ Bilge Ataca and John W. Berry, "Psychological, Sociocultural, and Marital Adaptation of Turkish Immigrant Couples in Canada," *International Journal of Psychology* 37, no. 1 (2002): doi:10.1080/00207590143000135)., 17

⁷⁸ Sheffy Bhayee. "Perceptions of Settlement Workers on the Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees., 20

⁷⁹ Meer Vijayann, "Syrian Diaspora Trying to Bridge Gap in Language and Other Services for Refugees | CBC News," CBCnews, November 27, 2016, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/syrian-refugees-language-1.3864588>)

are to be working, providing, getting a wife and fulfilling the role as the support, as the male of the house. While the women's needs are basically, finding that guy who will support me to fulfil my domestic role".⁸⁰ Settlement workers work closely with refugees and can make their own conclusions or recommendations. Some of their suggestions on why they believe SFR may wish to seek employment is a result of two conditions; (1) to support their family during a conflict or when their spouse is not working, (2) if the female has been encouraged by her family to build a career for herself.⁸¹ It is important to understand that not all of the SFR that were resettled in Canada come from the same conditions in Syria. Many of the SFR originated from small villages that had strong cultural practices and others resided in cities that were more liberal. The former can play a huge role in literacy levels and desire to work as well.

Some Syrian women had work experience pre-migration in camps they resided in outside of Syria. Samira Alsmadi, a Syrian who resided in a Jordanian camp reported that she was able to find employment that helped improve her quality of life and sense of stability.⁸² Alsamadi commented that "At first our financial situation was very difficult...Now our livelihoods have improved. We feel more at ease, and we feel that we have a second chance to build a better life".⁸³ When Syrian women are given a chance to make their own living this gives them more agency and power. Many Syrian women do not always get the liberty to choose their places of employment as often the goal is to make an income and not to pursue a career that could extend the transition to resettlement. SFR that have an educated background and obtained strong job

⁸⁰ Sheffy Bhayee. "Perceptions of Settlement Workers on the Needs and Challenges of Female Syrian Refugees.", 33

⁸¹ Ibid., 28

⁸² "Employment Gives Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan "second Chance"." Response to the Syria Refugee Crisis: Employment Gives Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan "second Chance". September 23, 2018. Accessed May 31, 2021. https://www.ilo.org/beirut/media-centre/fs/WCMS_645437/lang--en/index.htm.

⁸³ Ibid.

positions prior to resettlement often feel a sense of depression when their foreign credentials are not accepted. They comment that they are not encouraged by their settlement workers to find work in their field. Many SFR struggle to get their foreign credentials accepted while economic migrants are able to successfully transition into the job market.⁸⁴ SFR are left to the positions that are low paying and low skilled. In addition to maintaining employment, SFR must also care for their children and divide their time to their household duties.

Women gain a sense of independence and identity from their employment and ability to become an income earner.⁸⁵ There are dozens of settlement agencies that have programs that specifically target refugee women and their transition to the job market. Among them is the Newcomer Women's Services located in Toronto. This agency offers Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) which is fully funded by the IRCC and run during the weekdays. This agency also offers free onsite child care while the female newcomers are at their language classes.⁸⁶ This is a good step to encouraging women to come to classes and not have to worry about who is looking after their children. The agency also offers several other programs and opportunities for the newcomer women to interact with one another and build skills that can help them in their search for employment. The employment services available are completely free to newcomers, some of these services include, resume building, interview coaching and first aid certificates.⁸⁷ The Newcomer Women's agency is recognized as the first step for refugees wishing to seek transition into resettlement. Most Syrian refugees complained about the lack of

⁸⁴ Sonja Senthana et al., "Can Someone Help Me?", 283

⁸⁵ Sonja Senthana et al., "Employment Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women Arriving through Canada's Varied Refugee Protection Programmes.", 576

⁸⁶ "Newcomer Women's Services Toronto: English LINC Classes." Newcomer Women's Services. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.newcomerwomen.org/english-language-programs>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

information given to them about resettlement and confusion on how the Canadian system works. Often, refugees do not know where to ask for help and retain their information from unreliable resources such as friends or relatives.⁸⁸ The IRCC's goals for refugee resettlement is for refugees "to be self-sufficient and gain fully employed, but this is a long-term goal and requires the participation of all players, including government, businesses and civil society".⁸⁹ While social welfare services are available, refugees are still encouraged to find employment and make the most out of their resettlement. Public allowances can only cover so much, and this can leave SFR in the constant housing and income cycle that can be limiting to their needs.

Not all SFR experience barriers, many of the GAR women have found employment in their fields or have begun their own small business. Raghda Hassan and Um Omar are two SFR that resettled in Vancouver in 2018, they came from cultural backgrounds where they were raised to become homemakers.⁹⁰ The woman commented that they never thought they would be searching for a job until they came to Canada. Both women were able to find jobs at Tayybeh, a Syrian restaurant in Vancouver. The owner states that "Many refugee women want to work, but they find it hard to get a foot in the door...A lot of these women have excellent cooking skills, but they come here not knowing the language, not knowing the Canadian system of sending resumes and doing job interviews, and it's hard for them to know where they start".⁹¹ The work that women do can give them more confidence and a stronger sense of identity. Hassan comments that "Before, my kids never used to ask me for anything because I always had to ask

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Jenny Uechi, "Syrian Refugee Women in Canada Move into Job Market, Bringing Cooking Skills with Them," Canada's National Observer, March 10, 2018, accessed May 31, 2021, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2018/03/09/news/syrian-refugee-women-canada-move-job-market-bringing-cooking-skills-them>

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

my husband for money—which was never a problem because my husband never said no. But these days, my kids ask me for things, too”.⁹² Testimonies such as the latter are clear incentives for women to find work, become more independent and use the resources available to them more often. Finding a job is not easy and many women do not know how to apply for positions or where to find other job postings. Settlement agencies and other non-for-profit programs across Canada work hard to provide these resources for refugees to allow for a successful transition.

The conditions that SFR experience are not unique to those in Canada, but rather are gaps in the resettlement system. Many Syrian women require more time and assistance to learn an official language, find employment in their field, have flexible hours and more assistance when juggling between their duties.⁹³ The settlement workers perceptions on the Syrian culture may be correct based on the women they worked with, but these reflections can also be a point of advantage to suggest new avenues of employment. This could allow SFR to be their own bosses and make their own schedules through starting their own business selling items they can creatively make. This can include but not limited to food, hand crafted goods, home salons etc. SFR Tasia, is a homemaker who had minimal work experience was given the advice to start a small home business selling Syrian food.⁹⁴ This small business allowed Tasia to network with other Canadians and earn an income for herself and her children. Tasia comments that “the children [go to] school for long hours [so] I have long time to cook and receive orders and manage my [time]...I dream I can be self-employee[d] because, if I was hired outside, they require certain hours to work, and because of my children, I cannot work”.⁹⁵ Employment does

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Sonja Senthana et al., "Entrepreneurial Experiences of Syrian Refugee Women in Canada", 5

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6

not automatically need to come from the formal sector, but rather settlement workers can help SFR expand on their own skills that can in turn help SFR resettle with more ease. Networking with other Canadians can improve the language skills and knowledge refugees have of the Canadian culture.

A summary of the key ideas highlighted throughout this chapter include the advancement and accommodation of language courses to allow women to attend without the increase household and child bearing pressure. SFR require the assistance of their family in their resettlement and family reunification must be taken into consideration to allow SFR to be reunited with their spouse, adult children and parents. Further, low skilled and low paying jobs are not sustainable jobs for some SFR that believe their skills can be used in more formal sectors.

Some recommendations to advance female resettlement must begin with stronger family reunification. Among the most important Canadian refugee policies is the ability for permanent residents to be reunited with family members by sponsoring them to Canada. This includes, reunification with spouses, grandparents, children up to the age of 22.⁹⁶ Many of the SFR need the assistance from their family and extended family to support them in the resettlement. As illustrated throughout this chapter, income stability is a key pillar in the resettlement of refugees which can open doors for enhancements in housing, basic entities and allow for refugees to pursue higher education. The latter is all interconnected with employment, which can be attainable, but may require additional assistance for parents struggling with balancing their household responsibilities. Female resettlement can also take a step further by offering additional language classes and child care services as Newcomer Women's Toronto does. Further,

⁹⁶ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "IRCC Minister Transition Binder 2019: Family Reunification." Canada.ca. June 11, 2020. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/transparency/transition-binders/minister-2019/family.html>.

settlement workers can also play a huge role in encouraging SFR in expanding their comfort zones and taking on new tasks to build their confidence and agency.

The transition to resettlement is not a 12-month process as the IRCC may display it, but it is rather a long-term journey that refugees are encouraged to practice patience with. Pre-migration conditions are baggage that SFR carry with them to their resettlement and it can often impact their mental health and ambition to pursue employment. Single motherhood and burden-sharing are additional barriers that can develop throughout SFR arrival to Canada and can be managed through the various settlement agencies and their programs. Learning an official language is a prerequisite to employment and while the statistics expose the discrepancies in the rates of female employment and proficiency in one of the official languages, this does not deny the fact that many women are working within their fields.

Chapter 3: Mental Health

Pre-migration experiences can dramatically impact a refugee's transition to resettlement. When Canada decided to accept thousands of refugees fleeing from a war-torn nation they were aware that mental health difficulties would be part of the package. According to Mental Health.gov the definition of mental health includes our "emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act...handle stress, relate to others, and make choices".⁹⁷ There are dozens of early mental health warning signs that practitioners should look out for among newcomers. Some of the most common include, pulling away from people and usual activities, feeling helpless/hopeless, severe mood swings, inability to perform daily tasks like taking care of your kids.⁹⁸ This list is very extensive, but the recognition that mental health

⁹⁷ "What Is Mental Health?" MentalHealth.gov. Accessed May 31, 2021.
<https://www.mentalhealth.gov/basics/what-is-mental-health>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

is important is the first step to recovering from the condition. Prior to resettlement, many refugees were residing in neighbouring countries without proper refugee status and lived in poor living conditions. Some Syrian refugees may have experienced various levels of trauma through their exposure to “war, torture, food shortage, abuse” which may have gone untreated and became a stronger challenge upon arrival to Canada.⁹⁹ Since arrival, Syrian refugees experience an additional load of stress in relation to housing, food insecurity, language barriers and employment which can all act in the form of stress and mental health issues. Chapter three will seek to outline the mental health stressors that Syrian refugees endure upon their arrival to Canada. I argue that pre-migration experiences are initial contributors to some mental health issues along with increased struggles post migration. This chapter will use the examples of Lebanon and Germany to illustrate the commonality of mental health issues among Syrian refugees in other nations and the difficulty that social workers have trying to convince refugees to seek help when needed. Finally, I argue that Canada is well equip to continue to provide supportive mental health services to Syrian refugees, but lack the correct direction and cultural resources to succeed.

This chapter will begin by addressing the various pre-migration stressors that have contributed to the current mental health statuses of Syrian refugees. I will use examples of two nations that have hosted Syrian refugees and studied the stigma and reluctance of Syrian refugees to access mental health services. The latter will be offered as a support system to Canada in its quest to better provide resources and funding to mental health programs that work with refugees.

⁹⁹ Ciarán Patrick Collins Galts. 2016. “Refugee Mental Health: How Canada Supports the World’s Most Vulnerable in Their Transition to Becoming Canadian.” *University of Ottawa Journal of Medicine* 6 (2): 30–32. <https://doi.org/10.18192/uojm.v6i2.1753>, 30

It is important to note that not every Syrian refugee that has resettled in Canada experienced the same trauma of war, death or the loss of a loved one. Many Syrian refugees left in the early phases of the Syrian civil war before the destruction reached their families.¹⁰⁰ Conversations of mental health are not unique to the Western world, but for the thousands that temporarily resettled in Lebanon prior to coming to Canada they were met with resources to address their mental health. In a study to address the mental health of Syrian refugees in Lebanon authors Hala Kerbage, Filippo Marranconi, Yara Chamoun, Alain Brunet, Sami Richa, and Shahaduz Zaman jointly produced a resourceful article to illustrate this struggle. Their article offers testimonies from Syrian refugees and practitioners demonstrating the perceptions and stigma revolving around addressing issues of mental health. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees can access mental health and psychosocial support services through international NGOs and sometimes local programs.¹⁰¹ A common Arabic word used in their study was “اقناع” which translates to “convincing” as often the main role of doctors who wanted Syrians to seek support for their mental health.¹⁰² Practitioners in the study reported that refugees would say “I am very tired, I am nervous, I can’t stand my children...” but they do not say “I am depressed”.¹⁰³ The first step in treating the condition is recognizing that it exists in the first place. Often the issue originates due to the lack of education around mental health and what depression is. This is where the “اقناع” plays a role. Social workers say that convincing Syrian refugees in Lebanon that they need to treat their lack of sleep, nervousness or depression is not considered a priority to the

¹⁰⁰ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Syrian Outcomes Report."

¹⁰¹ Hala Kerbage et al., "Mental Health Services for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Perceptions and Experiences of Professionals and Refugees," *Qualitative Health Research* 30, no. 6 (2020): doi:10.1177/1049732319895241), 850

¹⁰² Ibid. 854

¹⁰³ Ibid.

asylum seekers.¹⁰⁴ Social workers in Canada similarly experience the same issues with Syrian refugees around recognition that they need help. One social worker in Canada reported that “If we are talking about Syrian or middle eastern, mental health is a very sensitive issue back there. Many times, we feel they need some mental health help, but its shame if they ask about it”.¹⁰⁵ Similarly in Lebanon social workers commented that “You have to explain to them [Syrian refugees] that there is nothing to be ashamed of”.¹⁰⁶ It is not common to see Syrian refugees go and independently search for mental health services and this is due to the stigma associated with the term.¹⁰⁷ Another conclusion could also be due to the fact that many refugees may think this is a service that is too expensive and is not necessary, which is the opposite as several mental health programs are completely free. For Syrians who temporarily resided in Lebanon and other neighbouring nations the excuse of limited resources and time to access additional services can be accepted. However, once resettled in Canada, mental health symptoms must be recognized by practitioners and social workers as soon as possible to avoid the severity of the condition.

This is not the first time that Canada has resettled refugees that have fled a war-torn nation. In fact, over the past few decades Canada has accepted over 50,000 refugees from Sri Lanka who experienced identical struggles as the current Syrian refugees have. Issues of housing, employment, lack of language proficiency are all conditions that impacted the mental health of many Sri Lankan refugees. In an article titled “‘If One Does Not Fulfil His Duties, He Must Not Be a Man’: Masculinity, Mental Health and Resilience Amongst Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Men in Canada” the authors offered insights into how resettlement struggles impact the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Sheffy Bhayee., 30

¹⁰⁶ Hala Kerbage et al., 854

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

mental illness of men. The article recognized that due to the conditions of war and trauma that these men experienced and the difficulties finding employment and adequate housing this led to the increase of drug and alcohol abuse, financial mismanagement, anger and rage among many of the refugee men.¹⁰⁸ The unemployment rates that these refugees were experiencing led them to feel helpless and unable to fulfill their cultural duties of being the traditional breadwinner of their families.¹⁰⁹ In turn, this also increased their mental health conditions that went untreated due to the stigma behind accessing these services. Many of these conditions overlap with those encountered by Syrian refugees, not unique to men. Similarly, social workers in Canada recognize that the witness of death, bombing and sickness can contribute to the feelings of helplessness and “the inability to protect and comfort their family from danger”.¹¹⁰ The latter can carry on to experience powerlessness of providing adequate housing and food security for their families during resettlement. Early warning signs can prevent the repetition of history.

In an article published by CAMJ, doctor Renos Papadopoulos a Jungian psychotherapist reported on Syrian refugees that “the very fabric of their being has been shaken by these situations: their identity, their beliefs, trust”.¹¹¹ The situations that refugees endure prior to migration may not appear immediately upon resettlement and may emerge 3-12 months after refugees have overcome the initial challenges of finding housing and employment.¹¹² A settlement worker noted that among her clients she believes that all of them have seen blood,

¹⁰⁸ William Affleck et al., ““If One Does Not Fulfil His Duties, He Must Not Be a Man””: Masculinity, Mental Health and Resilience Amongst Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Men in Canada,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 42, no. 4 (July 12, 2018): doi:10.1007/s11013-018-9592-9), 841

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 841

¹¹⁰ Sheffy Bhayee., 37

¹¹¹ Laura Eggertson. 2016. “Don’t Automatically Label Syrian Refugees as Mentally Ill.” *Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ)* 188 (6): E98–E98. <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.109-5239>.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

from the youngest to the oldest. She comments “All the clients I have, the kids have seen blood. They’ve seen people get killed, bombing and everything”.¹¹³ War and death are not easy concepts to forget and can extremely impact the mental health of a child let alone an adult. This exposure can be associated with impaired cognitive development and academic achievement among many of the young Syrian youth.¹¹⁴ Practitioners and settlement workers must remain vigilant for symptoms and early warning signs of mental illness from the beginning of the transition to resettlement. A settlement worker reported that when dealing with Syrian refugees “they will vocalize that they are an angry person. Especially when we have an altercation, they say I can’t control myself, I’m so angry, this is who I am, I can’t handle it, I can’t control it”.¹¹⁵ However, when their settlement workers ask them about their anger “They see it as their personality, as this is who they are. I’m just an angry person, I can deal with it in different ways”.¹¹⁶ Examples such as the latter demand the question about the relatedness of resettlement struggles with prior trauma as a contributor to mental health conditions. As illustrated in Chapter one, many Syrian GAR reported the lack of adequate housing, steady income and meaningful employment which add to the resettlement stress. The IRCC resettlement programs are not shy from addressing mental health, but the pathway to making these programs sustainable within Syrian refugee communities that are still heavily cultured demands more work from the IRCC.

According to the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the Canadian mental health refugee response should “focus on fostering people's wellness and recognizing the tremendous

¹¹³ Sheffy Bhayee., 37

¹¹⁴ Kristin Hadfield, Aly Ostrowski, and Michael Ungar, "What Can We Expect of the Mental Health and Well-being of Syrian Refugee Children and Adolescents in Canada?" *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne* 58, no. 2 (2017): doi:10.1037/cap0000102), 196

¹¹⁵ Sheffy Bhayee., 40

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

resilience of refugee populations and their experiences of trauma, loss, separation from family and friends, their hopes and goals for the future”.¹¹⁷ There is no denying that the Canadian resettlement program does offer a significant amount of mental health services to those seeking support and this is indicated in the Mental Health Commission. However, it is the type of resources that fit the needs of Syrian refugees which is lacking. The way the refugees are welcomed into Canada, where they live and work and what their access to education and training is are fundamental factors that can promote refugee’s mental health.¹¹⁸ The commission suggests that no single governmental body or level of government is or can be responsible for the mental health of refugees in Canada, but rather can sensitize Canadians such as immigration officers, settlement workers and teachers.¹¹⁹ In doing this, personnel that interact with Syrian refugees should learn ways to understand the culture and trauma that can affect the newcomers and “eliminate major sources of distress”.¹²⁰ In Canada, refugees can access mental health support through CAMH, mental health helplines, and programs for children and their families. Through the Canadian government refugees have access to coverage for psychotherapy/psychology counseling sessions.¹²¹ Mental health services are all across Canada and are not limited to handling just trauma from war but also torture and difficulties arising within children who experience war.

¹¹⁷ *Supporting the Mental Health of Refugees to Canada*. 2016. Mental Health Commission of Canada., 3

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ "Does the Interim Federal Health Program Provide Coverage for Mental Health Services?" Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. April 28, 2021. Accessed May 31, 2021. <https://www.cic.gc.ca/english/helpcentre/answer.asp?qnum=1332&top=33>.

I would like to highlight that points of trauma, family and goals for the future are key elements to understanding how refugees can make the most out of their transition to resettlement. In Chapter 2, I illustrated that many female refugees arrived in Canada without some of their immediate family and struggled to care for their family alone. The trauma that some females experience pre-migration is a key indicator that encourages the reality of family reunification. Many SFR need their family as a support system to pass the traumatic experiences. Further, both male and female Syrian refugees have goals to make the most out of their resettlement and rebuild their lives as they were prior to the war. This requires additional RAP support, increased access to language proficiency classes and more Arabic speaking settlement workers to assist in easier communication. A study on Syrian refugees in Germany indicated that many Syrians do not wish to seek mental health services due to the language barriers which are also another factor to take into consideration when suggesting services. In the case of Germany, Syrian refugees reported similar factors as those in Canada impacting their mental health; among those are employment, housing and income instability.¹²² Refugees claimed that they even feared fireworks as it triggered the fear of bombs being dropped on their homes or in their former community.¹²³ The most common response among refugees in various studies is the stigma around seeking mental health services. In the German study a Syrian commented “when someone hears that someone else went to a psychologist, then they say he’s crazy there was something with his head”.¹²⁴ The social norms that are structured in Syrian culture must be broken down by professionals who understand the Syrian culture, as mental health is not a *one*

¹²² Anna Renner et al., "Syrian Refugees in Germany: Perspectives on Mental Health and Coping Strategies," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 129 (2020): doi:10.1016/j.jpsychores.2019.109906), 3

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

size fits all. This study also noted that language barriers need to be considered among the services and as I illustrated in Chapter one, not all Syrian refugees are proficient in either of the official languages and this can impact their access to programs. Subsequently, even after Syrians are capable of speaking the host nations language a female refugee commented; “feelings are tough to talk about, even if it’s your first language. What is it going to be like, when you have to explain the whole thing in German, even though you don’t speak German very well”.¹²⁵

Ultimately, the issue of mental health services does not only lie in providing cultured programs, but also hiring those that are able to ethnically understand Syrians and convince them opposite of the stigma.

Do Canadian services offer Arabic and counsellors that have a background in the Syrian culture? In most cases the short answer is no. CAMH does offer the option to speak in Arabic to a mental health counsellor on the phone. Arabic speaking psychologists need to be widely advertised and offered to Syrian refugees. Dr. Papadopoulos suggested that “these cultural interpreters will play a big role in being able to help provide the care these folks need”.¹²⁶ Lack of cultured and language sensitive programs does not mean this is the end of the road, while in fact, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has been successful in working with newcomer children in supporting them in core courses, educating them and their families in their transition and reducing the load from parents. This is a good step in building up the new generation to feel supported and educated on the services and programs available to support their integration and can later reduce youth from accessing mental health services.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid., 5

¹²⁶ Laura Eggertson., 98

¹²⁷ Kristin Hadfield, Aly Ostrowski, and Michael Ungar., 196

Mental health is not always an easy topic to address and strongly impacts newcomers to Canada. Pre-migration conditions and experiences are life long memories that are baggage carried throughout resettlement. Among the key ideas presented in this chapter begin with the services offered. The services available in Canada need to be prepared to fund more mental health services in Arabic, offer additional counselling that is centred at gaining trust from refugees, understanding their culture and offering a step towards denying the stigma around seeking help. Transition to resettlement is not only learning English, gaining employment and/or education, it is taking care of one's mental health. This chapter outlined the pre-migration stressors the refugees in general face which can impact their transition in the long term. The primary example presented was the Sri Lankan refugees that experience similar hardships to Syrian refugees. My final recommendations suggest including Syrian refugees' voices into the understanding of their mental health. Conversations with Syrian youth can help shape a stronger foundation of what is in their heads and how services can be molded to meet their conditions.

Conclusion:

Canadian refugee policy was the first step to identifying Canada's commitment internationally towards refugees. With every new change in government Canadians see a shift in immigration and refugee goals. The Liberal Party's goal to resettle thousands of refugees was generous and set a humanitarian example internationally, but it was not the end of Syrian refugees' journey, but rather the beginning. This major research paper attempted to highlight the transition to resettlement that Syrian refugees in Canada experience. Through identifying the housing and income situations in chapter one in which I addressed income inequality, food insecurity and employment. Chapter one concluded that Syrian refugees in Canada are limited by their RAP monthly allowance and their limited official language skills. The latter intersects with

refugees' quest to find meaningful employment within their field. Lack of official language courses available and foreign credential transferability have resulted in hundreds of Syrians without the incentive to abandon welfare financial services. This struggle is incredibly difficult for SFR in particular who often experience a change in their cultural gender roles and often arrive to Canada missing members of their family. SFR struggle to attend official language classes sometimes due to the lack of child care services. Female refugees in general suffer from low employment rates and skills. Leading them to take on low wage and skilled employment options. SFR need to be encouraged by their settlement workers to access more resettlement programs to better situate themselves in a position to find meaningful and suitable employment.

The final chapter of this research paper touched on the mental health conditions that Syrian refugees endure from pre-migration and continuing after their resettlement to Canada. The stigma associated with mental health and seeking services that can better treat a condition are very high universally. This paper recommended that Canada is encouraged to offer additional *cultured* services that better suit the population utilizing them which can be as simple as having Arabic-speaking counsellors.

Policy recommendations that Canada should consider begin with the amendment of the IRCC's RAP fund. This allowance is extremely limiting to refugees in general and only offers enough money to *barely* get by. The RAP should match the average cost of rent in the province or city and the allowance for basic needs should be based on the number of members in the family not a lumpsum. Further, additional resources should be offered to families with children under the age of 12 as this age group can have extremely demanding basic needs which can hinder a family's monthly budget. An increase in the monthly allowance will in turn allow for

refugees to secure more sustainable housing and limit their use of the food bank. The latter will offer an overview on the level of inequality experience in Canada.

In this major research paper, I addressed the limited offerings of official language courses multiple times. The IRCC needs to urgently increase the funding to centers such as LUSO, Cross Cultural Learner Center and many more that are the pillars to resettlement. An option to increase classes can include online learning, having former students who benefitted from the program assist in helping others learn English/French. The more classes available, the easier the transition becomes on refugees. Newcomers Women's Toronto is a prime example that I would like to lean on for this policy recommendation. They offer services targeted for the increase's success of newcomer women. Child care, resume building, interview skills and job opportunities are the steps to a successful transition.

Family reunification remains an important part of resettlement. During migration, some family members may have been separated which can dramatically impact the family structure and incentive to work and begin the transition. Especially among SFR, I reported the difficulties that many women experience without their spouses or adult children. Canadian refugee policy considers family reunification among its key pillars and should be strictly upheld to allow for a successful resettlement. Children and adult *single* children, spouses and grandparents should be considered priority members that Syrian permanent residents have the right to request their reunification. With the support of family, the division of labour and household duties can become more easier and allow for a stronger resettlement for all.

As illustrated in the final chapter, my recommendations for mental health services are clear. Cultured programs are essential to tearing down the stigma associated with mental health and allow for services to reach more refugees in need. The current program is well intentioned

and on an effective path to addressing mental health. The chapters in this paper each addressed important topics that can shape an understanding of the Syrian refugee resettlement program. The policy recommendations I listed offer an insight to ways in which I personally believe could help the Canadian refugee system to allow for a stronger resettlement for all.

This major research paper attempted to add to the limited but existing literature on the resettlement experiences of Syrian refugees in Canada. Additional research and studies on the skills and trades that Syrians bring to Canada can allow for a stronger understanding of how they can give back to the economy. Further, advancements on SFR and their encounters with gender-based violence can fill the gap in literature and incentivise more women struggling to learn their rights and for more services to become available to them. Finally, mental health conditions of Syrian children would better provide a full picture of just how much war and violence impacts a child cognitively, physically and emotionally throughout his/her life.

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