



BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION:

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AMONG REFUGEES IN CANADA

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CITIZENS FOR
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INTRODUCTION

Like many, I am a first generation Canadian. I came to this country as a privately sponsored refugee and I have lived here for the best part of my life in over 11 years. I went to university and graduated with bachelor's degree, started a family and had two kids and eventually sponsored my family. In the words of Warsan Shire, "One does not leave home unless home is the mouth of a shark". I relate to these words in so many ways and I believe so are many other refugees who come to this country for the sole reason of getting a life and finding a 'home', not a better one because most refugees do not have good lives to begin with, because if they did they wouldn't have left.

Most often, Canadians regard themselves as 'caring' and quite accepting towards 'others', those who differ from them in race, religion and ethnicity. There is, however, another side of our society, one that is not as good as we would like to think: an uncaring side of Canadians when it comes to

refugees (Domise, 2019). Aspects of this have come to light in recent years and months following the election of Donald Trump and the increase of refugees crossing our borders. Rhetoric towards refugees from right-wing media have sparked conversations about acceptance of refugees in this country. An article published by MacLean's earlier this year title "*The rise of uncaring Canadians*" shows a shift that is happening in terms of some Canadians' attitudes towards refugees and visible minorities. More and more Canadians see refugees as a threat to their culture and jobs, and as being unable to integrate into Canadian society (Domise, 2019).

Research Question

This research proposal attempts to answer the question: "What are the socio-economic challenges/barriers that refugees face in integrating into Canadian society?"

To begin with, a full analysis of the contributing factors to social exclusion and barriers to integration that refugees and new immigrants face were conducted, while at the same time exploring the effectiveness of existing social policies and programs designed to tackle this issue. The scope of social exclusion is explored, particularly the high rates of unemployment and underemployment among former and current refugees, its economic implications and the kind of services available for these people to access and combat social exclusion and enhance better integration.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Terms

Integration: From an immigration perspective, integration is the process of attaining economic mobility and social inclusion for newcomers. It involves accepting newcomers and their culture while at the same time expecting them to take in their host nations' culture and norms.

Newcomer: According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, a newcomer is someone who has been in the host country (Canada) for a period of five years or less.

Refugee: According to the United Nations 1951 Convention; a refugee is a person who is outside his or her country and has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Social Exclusion: According to Barnes (2005), social exclusion is defined as the condition by which individuals in a society are socially, economically and politically more disadvantaged than others depending on a variety of factors.

Historical Context

Refugees were first defined as a distinct group of immigrants in Canadian law in the 1976 Immigration Act thus requiring the government to meet its obligations to refugees under international agreements. Following this, the Canadian government started a new program that allowed private groups and individuals such as churches and community

organizations to sponsor refugees and settle them in Canada as permanent residents. Since 1979, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program has welcomed more than 327,000 refugees (Dirks, 2019), over and above those resettled with government funding.

Canada's immigration act was changed after the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and became the [Immigration and Refugee Protection Act \(IRPA\)](#). While this new act maintained most of the principles regarding immigration and refugees from the previous one, it brought two significant changes to Canadian immigration and refugee law: first, it gave the government more powers to detain and deport landed immigrants who were suspected of posing a security threat to Canada; secondly, it created the [Safe Third Country Agreement \(STCA\)](#) between Canada and the United States. Under this new agreement, refugee claimants are required to request refugee protection in the first "safe" country in which they arrive, unless they qualify for an exception to the Agreement (IRCC, n.d.).

Due to conflicts in the Middle East and continued civil wars in some sub-Saharan African countries, there has been an increase in the number of refugees seeking refuge in western countries, particularly in Europe and North America. With the Trump Administration's [Travel Ban](#), the United Nations has pleaded with the Canadian government to settle more refugees.

Canada admits large number of refugees each year; however, in response to the current context there has been an uptake of refugees from the Middle East, particularly from Syria. According to the IRCC (2019), Between November 4th, 2015, and April 30th, 2019, 63,938 Syrian refugees were admitted to Canada. While Canada admits refugees to give them protection and new beginnings, the Canadian immigration system also attempts to recognize their social and economic contribution to the country (Puma, et al., 2018).

Despite what may seem like a noble commitment to refugee resettlement, it is no secret that Canada's history of immigration is at the same time filled with discrimination and exclusion. From the Chinese head tax, to the deportation Japanese Canadians, Canada's immigration policy had been rife with social and economic discrimination. While much has improved in the past decades, some members of Canadian society have a preconceived notion of who should be a "Canadian" and who should be accepted into our labor market. Most of the time, these assumptions are deeply rooted in discriminatory racial ideology (Jackson et al. 2006). This leads us to the topic of social exclusion being experienced by newcomers today.

Contemporary Context

In the immigration and settlement studies field, thinking about social inclusion (or exclusion) is often conceptualized in terms of social capital and support (Caidi & Allard, 2005), Hynie et al. (2011). How big of a role can lack of social support and social capital play in social exclusion of refugees and

new immigrants? To answer this, one must know what social capital is? Social capital means the social connections and networking among individuals. It encompasses the ability of people to invest resources (time, energy or even money) in relationships with an aim of reciprocity (Hynie et al. (2011). Newcomers experience reduced social networks compared to non-immigrants, and as result can experience a prolonged period of social exclusion. because of the intersectionality between social support, network and capital, poor access to social networks means new immigrants and refugees may



have fewer resources to begin with (Hynie et al. (2011). Social capital can create pathways to social inclusion, on the other hand, social exclusion prevents and diminishes social capital by reducing the levels of trust between host communities and new immigrants/refugees. Social capital is required for refugees and new immigrants to better function in society and have better economic outcome, therefore, the better refugees/new immigrants' social capital the greater their chances of integration into society Caidi & Allard (2005), Hynie et al. (2011). As Hynie et al. (2011) explains there are three types of social support that newcomers need – the basic food, transportation and housing; emotional support offered through empathy, love, trust and caring and thirdly, information in the form of ideas and suggestions that are geared solving their problems. Social and economic discrimination typically lead to a kind of exclusion from society that significantly impacts the lives of refugees and new immigrants in this country, including their social and economic integration into Canadian society. Social exclusion is a multidimensional issue that affects both the individual and society in general. Individuals in a new country are likely to be rejected by their host communities when they are deemed 'unfit' and are perceived as different from the local people in terms of ethnicity, language, and background (Jackson et al. 2006). In a Canadian context, refugees and new immigrants tend to be rejected by many employers solely based on their immigration status and ethnic background and not by their lack of skills or experience (Jackson et al. 2006).

Recently, at a conference [Informing Migration Policy: International Experience and Evidence Conference](#), hosted at Carleton University, the issue of social exclusion came up. Some of the presenters who were representing organizations that directly work with refugees explored why some Canadian businesses do not hire refugees and immigrants in customer service. It was pointed out that some employers fear losing customers because of the accents of immigrant workers. Most notably, it was mentioned that some Canadian customers make the assumption that their jobs are being outsourced to workers overseas and that the person on the other side of the call is not actually in Canada. The effects of these assumptions are borne by refugees and newcomers who just want to be financially independent and to integrate well in their new communities and economy.

Similarly, the literature suggests that there are pre-conceived assumptions held by many Canadian business owners that refugees' education from their home countries is of low quality and inequivalent to Canadian education (Reitz (2001). Furthermore, many Canadian businesses do not consider pre-landing work experience of refugees. While some studies have shown that refugees tend to have lower educational levels (particularly in [Protracted Refugee Situations](#)), painting all refugees with the same brush is neither fair nor accurate. According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), there is a lack of research and data on the pre-landing experience of refugees, a key factor in determining their economic integration in Canada. There



is, however, a known connection between income/earning of refugees and their pre-landing educational level (IRCC, 2010).

A 2019 study by Pictou et al. on labor market outcomes of refugees and immigrants from 13 different countries concluded that among the refugees who gained university degrees, those from Somalia, Pakistan, China and Afghanistan earned a little more than their high school graduate counterparts, while those from Cambodia, Poland and Sri-Lanka earned significantly higher than their high school counterparts. This shows that even though higher levels of education improve the overall earnings of most refugees, there are other 'unknown' factors that could hinder them from being fully competitive in the labor market. Racial and religious discrimination could account for some of the unknown factors

here. Another possible reason for the earnings gap can be lack of recognition of foreign credentials, skills, work experience and expertise of refugees from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. As Reitz, (2001) noted race is another factor that determines how foreign education and work experience of immigrants from outside Europe are evaluated in Canada.

When it comes to accessing high-status occupations in the Canadian labour market, refugees tend to be highly discriminated against. Studies have shown that refugees who were in professional or management positions prior to their arrival in Canada typically end up in precarious employment situations. Despite their generally higher academic attainment, refugees experience much higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than Ca-

nadian-born individuals (Houle & Yssaad, 2010).In addition, the majority of refugees who held managerial and other professional occupations are observed to have experienced a downward mobility into clerical/sales/services and technical occupations (Krahn et al. 2000).

There exist structural factors in the Canadian labour market that help explain the “downward mobility” of these highly qualified refugees. As emphasized by Krahn et al. (2000), refugee professionals face structural barriers imposed by licensing bodies (such as the Canadian Medical Association, for example), and many of those professional

refugees face difficulty in having their professional credentials recognized. In addition to credential recognition, refugees also face discrimination in the labour market, as hiring companies are reluctant to offer jobs to qualified refugees due to their race, language, or other “non-Canadian” characteristics. [Intersectionality](#) or discrimination based on overlapping social identities immigration status, gender, race, sexual orientation, and religion compound the discrimination suffered by refugees majority of who are racialized (Iyar, 2018).

Krahn et al.’s study also indicated that managerial/professional refugees from Yugoslavia were marginally advantaged compared to refugees from Africa and Middle East. Although the marginal advantage of refugees from Yugoslavia could be attributed to their typically higher post-secondary credentials, the results support speculation that “white” refugees or those from European backgrounds fare better in the Canadian labour market. Similarly, Bevelander and Pendakur (2014) assessed the employment and earnings trajectories of refugees and family reunion immigrants in Canada and Sweden using two national level sources of data; in both cases, refugees’ country of birth made a significant difference in employment rates and earning trajectories for men and women. Those from former Yugoslavia had much higher integration to the labour force and earned more compared to refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

In light of these findings in the literatures, this study sought to understand the lived experiences of social exclusion among refugees in Canada.



METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Framework

Rather than looking at historical and quantitative data alone, a community-based approach was used for this study in an attempt to focus on the lived experiences of refugees facing social exclusion. This study was also expanded by interviewing a sample group of former and current refugees about their lived experiences of social exclusion. Since refugee integration is strongly embedded within the Canadian immigration and refugee policy, a quantitative data analysis was also conducted to examine the effectiveness of the programs that government implemented to sustain smooth integration. This study also explores existing research on agencies that work directly with immigrants and refugees such as sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs), private sponsors and faith-based organization that support refugees, to explore connections between the successful integration of refugees and their sponsorship programs.

Data Collection

The participants in the research included twenty current and former refugees who currently live in five different provinces (AB, BC, MB, ON and NS). An e-mail requesting their participation was individually sent to some participants, some of whom I know as former refugees and have come through the [student refugee program](#), while others

were recruited through non-profit refugee organizations. A detailed description and the overall scope of the research project was also shared with the participants and the agencies, giving them the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding their participation of the project. Confidentiality and self-determination were also clearly stated and explained to the participants before the research was conducted.



Participants Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Province of Residence	Country of Origin	Year of Entry
1	Male	30-40	AB	South Sudan	2007
2	Female	20-30	NS	Iraq	2014
3	Male	30-40	NS	Syria	1986
4	Male	30-40	ON	Somalia	2011
5	Female	20-30	NS	Rwanda	2012
6	Male	30-40	ON	Somalia	2010
7	Female	50+	ON	Burundi	2019
8	Female	30-40	ON	Burundi	2016
9	Female	50+	ON		2015
10	Female	30-40	ON	Uganda	2015
11	Female	30-40	MB	Somalia	2007
12	Female	40-50	ON	Nigeria	2017
13	Female	40-50	ON	Uganda	2017
14	Male	20-30	BC	Somalia	2011
15	Male	20-30	NS	Somalia	2018
16	Male	50+	ON	Nigeria	2019
17	Female	16-20	ON	Burundi	2019
18	Female	20-30	ON	Burundi	2019
19	Female	20-30	ON	Burundi	2019
20	Male	30-40	ON	Zimbabwe	2019

This study was conducted using a semi-structured focus group discussion and survey questionnaires with both open-ended and closed questions to allow respondents to qualify their responses and allow for comparisons across participants (Neuman & Robson, 2009). Participants also had the option of completing the questionnaires online. The survey questionnaires were divided into four sections: demographics; education and language training; employment and labour force participation; and social capital.

A conversational method was used in the focus group discussion, allowing the participants the opportunity and support to freely discuss their opinions regarding the research topic. Kovach (2010) states; “story telling has a holistic nature that provides a means for sharing remembrances that evoke the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental” (Kovach, 2010, p. 43). Using a focus group discussion encouraged participants to be dialogic and collaborative as they shared their lived experiences of the subject matter. Participants were

then asked to share any lived experiences of social exclusion and how it impacted their economic outcome. During the focus group discussions, questions were asked at the end of the session to get final input from the participants.

Notes were taken during the entirety of the discussion and observations recorded both physical and emotional reactions to the questions being asked within the group. This process gave me the opportunity to reflect on the importance of this issue without losing sight of the research question. It also put a human perspective on the study such that it was not just done to get numerical measures, but to explore the true scope of this issue and highlight the human side of it through participants' feelings. A major gap in the existing studies, for

example, is the lack of focus on the connection between the individual as the refugee and their connection to their culture/ethnicity.

In an effort to show appreciation and hospitality, refreshments were provided to participants in the focus group discussion. Providing honoraria like refreshments is to first acknowledge the importance of their input and validate the significance of their participation and time in this study. While Norton and Manson (1996) suggest that compensation for the entire community be considered in marginalized communities such as Indigenous peoples and refugees, the scale of this project restricted any direct honoraria to the focus group participants, with the hope that the results and recommendations of this study will be of benefit to the broader community.

Method of Analysis

Content analysis was conducted on all data collected from survey responses and focus group notes. This enabled me to collate information from all the participants to reveal major themes in response to the research question. A reflection on the interviewing process was conducted to make sure all facts were correctly collected and were respectful of the responses given by participants. A comparative analysis approach was used to conduct a comprehensive examination of existing literature with lived experience as the major focus. Both a descriptive and exploratory analysis were then done to compare variables of interest, with a view to proposing appropriate nationwide policies.



FINDINGS

Focus Group Discussion

1. Difficulty in attaining work permits

One of the first issues that refugees face is finding employment. *“The main reason for seeking asylum is getting a better life, and employment is the gateway to that”*, said one participant. Most refugee claimants need work permits and social insurance numbers in order to work in Canada, however, as noted by some participants, not everyone gets a work permit, and while it is free for refugee claimants to apply, other documentation can be requested such as medical exams. Most participants indicated that the key reason they want to get work permits and social insurance numbers is to find employment and not rely on government social assistance.

““We came here to better our lives, and finding a job is good for that. I think we don’t want to rely on welfare.”

– Focus Group Participant

This sentiment of being financially independent was universal among the participants. Some even mentioned that if going to school means incurring debt, they would prefer finding employment first and then start thinking about going back to school. This all shows the importance of employment to refugees, and defies the narrative that refugees come here to take advantage of the Canadian welfare system.

2. The 900 series Social Insurance Number as a form of discrimination

“If they see my social insurance number, even if I qualify for the job, they say, so you are a refugee or temporary worker! That means you are not here permanently.”

– Focus Group Participant

This is one of several statements about the 900 series Social Insurance Numbers that the participants raised. They explained that the 900 series SIN is a clear means of discrimination against refugees who are seeking employment. The 900 series SINs are, and social insurance numbers issued to temporary workers who are neither Canadian citizens nor permanent residents such as refugees and international students. As one participant mentioned, it is saying, *“I am a refugee to a stranger without knowing how they will react”*. The 900 Social Insurance Number exposes the vulnerability of refugees in the Canadian labor market. It identifies them as neither temporary workers nor a permanent resident and creates a situation of uncertainty for those seeking employment and employers who might be willing to hire newcomers but are not confident enough to hire a refugee (Jackson, 2010).

The results of the lack of work permit and the 900 series SIN numbers impose far-reaching implications for the economic and social outcome of refugees. Most of the participants noted that

they do not get their work permits until their refugee claim application is assessed, a process that takes sometimes several months to finalize. During this period, with no options for earning their own income, refugee claimants become reliant on government social assistance.

3. Cuts to Legal Aid in Ontario

With the help of Matthew house, most of the residents applied for legal aid and were able to hire lawyers. However, when the provincial government introduced [cuts to legal aid funding to refugees](#), they become worried, unaware of how or if their asylum process will continue. As one participant noted, “it was very stressful not having the financial capacity to hire a lawyer, and now risking your whole life and being deported if your process doesn’t go well.”

All the participants agreed on the importance of legal aid to their asylum process. They brought this issue up because they said it affects how long the

hearing of their cases takes, which in turn affects their economic stability and how well they will be able to support themselves and the families they have left back in their home countries. During the discussion, they also expressed their gratitude towards the federal government’s help in funding the legal aid. As one participant put it; “I was happy when my lawyer called and said she will be able to continue processing my application because they received money from the government.”

Survey Findings

1. The Importance of Social Capital

The connection between social capital and employment income is critical in terms of the social and economic integration of new immigrants and refugees. Unlike economic immigrants, refugees often [lack pre-established networks](#) in their new host country where they can easily connect and find employment. As the [number of refugees](#) in Canada is increasing each year, the development of their



social networks is as important as finding a stable job for their successful integration. The results of my study show that most participants (15 out of 20) value social connections and engage in some type of social activities, mostly in religious gatherings. In terms of their frequency of engagement, 17 out of 20 indicated that they go to social or religious gathering as often as possible. This suggests social networks and connections are an important factor for integration.

2. Foreign Credential Recognition

Overall, Lack of credential recognition affects majority of newcomers, and while it disproportionately affects economic immigrants, previous studies on labor participation of refugees suggest that refugee professionals face structural barriers imposed by licensing bodies in Canada (Krahn et al. 2000). The results of this study

support this statement. Most of the responded shared experiences of undervalued credentials and work experiences. Eight of the twelve participants who needed foreign credential assessment did not get the results they hoped for. As one participant put, “I came here with a university degree, but they wouldn’t recognize it, so I had to work at Walmart and earn a low wage”. This shows how the lack of foreign credential recognition can often lead to underemployment of refugees and immigrants. Despite their immigration status, many have the capacity to do professional jobs such as dentistry, nursing, or social work, but because of their lack of Canadian work experience and credential recognition, they end up doing menial jobs and over time lose their ability to secure a career in their original field of study.

DISCUSSION

Unfortunately, data on the labour market integration of refugees and their economic outcomes tend to be limited in scope; however, there is substantial quantitative data on post-landing experiences such as language acquisition and social integration. This is often found through evaluation programs done by the IRCC (Wilkinson & Garcia, 2017). The two main dimensions of newcomers' experiences in their host countries (whether they come in as refugees or immigrants) are social and economic integration. Such integration requires active participation of both the refugees and the people of the host country. According to the 2001 IRCC report, such integration

needs to be holistic; it must include a variety of factors from both sides into consideration and not just expect newcomers to abandon their own cultural identity. The emphasis should rather be on finding ways to integrate the differences in a multicultural and diverse society (IRCC,2001).

Immigrants and refugees contribute significantly to the Canadian labour market. However, their economic contributions and potential are underutilized and as a result the Canadian economy is losing its edge in an increasingly competitive global market (Reitz, 2001). Houle & Yssaad (2010) found that some

Canadian employers deny the legitimacy of foreign credentials and skill development of new immigrants and refugees, even if they were admitted into the country based on these same credentials.

According to DeVoretz et al. (2004), privately sponsored refugees performed better economically than asylum seekers who often lacked support mechanisms from relatives and friends. Unlike the Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), privately sponsored refugees are immediately connected to an established group of people who are already there to help them navigate their host communities. Through this program, sponsors can create and establish social networks for the refugees they sponsor. These connections help refugees acquire language training, find employment opportunities, and increase their knowledge and understanding of their host

community and the country at large (Krivenko, 2016).

The length of time that refugees lived in the country also plays a key role in their economic performance and integration process. DeVoretz et al. (2004) explain that the economic performance of refugees follows the typical quadratic shape predicted by the human capital model. Earnings rise significantly as investment in language and other skills increase productivity in the Canadian labour market. In addition, their study asserts that a peak in earnings occurs between the age interval 35 to 49, after which earnings decline due to the deterioration of the human capital. As for all populations, local market condition is another factor that affects refugees' successful integration into the Canadian labour market regardless of human capital characteristics.



RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to better understand the social and economic exclusion of refugees in Canada, we need more data that separates the prelanding and post landing experiences of refugee. Differentiating pre-landing factors such as home country education, work experience, and foreign credentials from post-landing factors such as language acquisition and Canadian work experience are deemed very useful in determining the integration of refugees. While there are significant differences among refugees in terms of their educational level, work experience, and ability to speak one of Canada's official languages, however, my research supports the finding that the racial factor often supersedes these characteristics to determine refugees' success in economic and social integration.

My findings further support the claim that refugees and immigrants are discriminated against when it comes to employment and the hiring process. For example, newcomers are required to have Canadian work experience in most jobs, yet they are not given the opportunities to attain that experience. The Canadian government should enact policies that prevent employers from implementing discriminatory hiring guidelines and processes that prevent refugees from equally participating in the Canadian labour market, including removing the requirement for Canadian work experience.

The Canadian government should also implement a policy that does not allow employers to discreetly discriminate against refugees and

immigrants. The first step in creating such policy is to eliminate the temporary 900 SIN series which identifies refugees and temporary workers as neither permanent residents nor citizens of this country, giving employers opportunity to discriminate against them on the sole basis of their immigrant status.

In Ontario, the human rights code states that "*it is public policy in Ontario to recognize the inherent dignity and worth of every person and to provide for equal rights and opportunities without discrimination*". What this code signifies is the importance of inclusion and participation. All people, regardless of their immigration status, ethnic background or race have equal rights to participate and contribute to their communities' wellbeing and that includes participation in the labour market.

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