

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada: Lived Experience, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 3

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) hosted a six-part digital series focused on Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and integration. The series aimed to engage stakeholders to consider Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and identify changes to policy and practice that will make Canada more inclusive and responsive to refugees' needs. Over the course of the six sessions, refugees, settlement workers and service providers, policymakers, researchers, and students were brought together to share insights and lessons learned from lived experience, settlement practice, and research.

The third session of the series took place on November 19th, 2020 and featured three speakers – Mohamad al Chebli, Wael Wahba, and Hasan al Shebli – discussing their lived experiences of refugee resettlement in Canada. The speakers responded to questions in Arabic and English interpretation was provided by Mounir Nasri, a Social Entrepreneur and Advisor in the field of Community Development. The session was moderated by Genevieve Ritchie, a Doctoral candidate in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto.

Summary of responses by Mohamad al Chebli

- Mohamad came to Canada in January 2016. He initially lived in Toronto but moved to Mississauga in 2019 where he continues to live now with his family.
- Mohamad spent his first weeks in Canada in a hotel facing challenges finding permanent housing for his family and schools for his children. He received support from different organizations such as COSTI, churches, and community members.
- Mohamad discussed landlords' requirement that tenants be employed as an exclusionary practice for refugees. He suggested that settlement agencies act as co-signers and guarantors for rental leases to reduce challenges securing housing for refugees and newcomers. Mohamad said that he would have preferred to settle outside of the city upon arrival to Canada because he likely would have been able to find more affordable rental prices.
- Mohamad stressed his sponsor's role in registering his children in schools and helping his family to settle, finding dental and medical care, access to transportation and community services, and addressing other immediate family needs. Arabic speaking community members also helped by providing lots of insights, advice, connections, and sharing their knowledge about Canada.
- LINC school as a language program was helpful at the beginning to get the basic skills, but it was not helpful when he wanted to enroll in higher education. Mohamad recommended better occupational language training opportunities for individuals that want to learn English while they work. He also asked for better guidance in choosing adequate language program classes for newcomers.

- World Education System (WES) helped Mohamad to evaluate his previous education and he was able to register in a college program and won a scholarship. Mohamad expressed pride to be able to study in Canada but called for better bridging between language services and professional training for newcomers.
- Mohamad said that his situation would have been much more difficult without the support of the Canadian government.
- Mohamad called on the government to allow refugees to participate in local political activities as a way of giving voice to refugees' concerns. Currently, refugees must wait until they acquire Canadian citizenship to vote in Canada.

Summary of responses by Wael Wahba

- Wael came to Canada in August 2017 from Egypt. He lives in Toronto and is a full-time student at George Brown College doing an Advanced Diploma in Heating and Cooling Design.
- Wael's first weeks in Canada were characterized by difficulties finding a job and establishing connections, which led him to seek help from Arabic-speaking community members. He initially lived in London but moved to Toronto after one month.
- Wael went to the YMCA, and they provided him with various settlement supports. He also connected with a caseworker to help him find a job and volunteer opportunities, but efforts in this area did not turn into employment. He was ultimately able to find a job in a restaurant through some friends.
- Wael said that being immersed in an Arabic-speaking community eased his integration, because they understood the traditions, challenges, and different responsibilities of newcomers in a country like Canada.
- Wael stressed the importance of affordable housing for refugees and asked for more support from the government to help refugees initially secure affordable housing for a period until their situation improved.
- Wael also he called on settlement agencies to educate refugees and newcomers on their rights and the laws around housing and employment to help them avoid being victims of fraud and illegal practices.
- Wael spoke about the difficulty of finding jobs in Canada that match his previous education and experience. On the recommendation of his friends, he enrolled in a Heating and Cooling education program to begin an alternate career, and he is nearing completion of the program.
- Wael said that his Canadian education will be valuable worldwide. Though he found some difficulties adapting to the system initially, he got used to it with time. Wael recommended that changes be made to language programs to meet the needs of low-skilled refugees.
- Wael praised all levels of the Canadian government for their services for newcomers and refugees and expressed pride at being part of a multicultural and diverse country. However, he recommended that the government invest more in the skills and training of refugees, because financial support is not the only way to help those in need.

Summary of responses by Hasan al Shebli

- During his first weeks in Canada, Hasan focused on registering in a language program to improve his language skills and improve his chances of finding employment. Hasan ended up working in a restaurant owned by other Arabic-speaking community members due to his low English skills. Unhappy with his situation, he went back to language classes and improved his English. Eventually, he was able to secure employment in a restaurant owned by non-Arabic speaking individuals where he had more opportunity to practise his English.
- Hasan said that having a Canadian education provides an advantage in securing meaningful jobs in Canada. He shared that he is considering doing a security guard training program after fully completing his language classes.
- Hasan described finding affordable rent as very difficult. He was eventually able to find housing with the help of COSTI which provided him with a list of places he could rent. Hasan felt that there should be more support and specific guidance for refugees and newcomers on how to secure affordable housing. He said that it is especially challenging for large families to find housing and affordable places.
- The Arab Community Center in Toronto (ACCT) was very helpful to Hasan. They helped him with paperwork and translation and provided information about various services.
- Hasan said that it was initially difficult to switch from his home country to a country that he knew nothing about, but he feels that he has ultimately adapted well and is part of the Canadian society.
- Hasan credited the support he received from the Canadian government to settle in Canada and expressed gratitude at having access to education and healthcare.

Discussion Notes

- The speakers were asked if they would choose to return home if it became safe to do so:
 - Mohamad said that Canada is ultimately better for his children as they have studied here and integrated from a young age. He said that he would potentially visit to spend time with family, but he does not feel that he would be able to fully return after getting used to the Canadian way of life. He also discussed how the healthcare and education systems are very strong in comparison to other places. Canadian education in particular has a superior reputation. Mohamad also mentioned rights and freedom of expression and less racism and discrimination in how he is treated. Finally, he said that his country has been irrevocably changed by war and it is not possible to go back to what was there before.
 - Wael agreed that a lot of refugees come to Canada with the idea of going back at a certain point but said that this perspective really changes after living in Canada and becoming accustomed to the quality of life. He said that people in Canada are treated much more humanely and the availability of supports, education, and healthcare – particularly for children – now feels essential. He cannot imagine being able to go back to living in his country of origin at this point.

- Hasan agreed that it is really difficult to return to his country of origin now. He said that he has met a lot of people who have been in Canada for several decades who came with initial goal of returning, but no one really returns. The rights afforded, the ability to speak your mind, and the potential for children to study and build their lives are not available elsewhere. Hasan felt that hospitals and healthcare in particular are superior in Canada and said that in his previous country it was necessary to know someone or be rich to get access to healthcare.
- The speakers were asked about refugees' political participation:
 - Mohamad said that in Canada if you have only permanent residency you cannot vote; however, ahead of acquiring citizenship it would be good if you could vote in matters like education and the environment – if not federally, then at least locally.
 - Hasan said that voting is a way of giving back and saying thank you to the government. Refugees were brought to Canada and they want to give back by being vocal about issues that matter to them. In the last election they would have liked to be more vocal and share how they feel about what the government has done for them in a more civic way.
 - Wael said that there was not a proper democratic system in his country, and people are not actively engaged in politics because if you are outspoken about that you will go to jail. In his opinion it is not easy for refugees to become involved in politics in Canada because it is not necessarily their first priority. He does not feel that at this point he has enough of an understanding of each party and what they stand for to make an informed decision. At the same time, he said that voting makes you feel like you are valued and heard and gave the example of people in the United States being able to vote a president out.