



A Partnership Approach to Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Toronto and Mississauga: Preliminary Findings

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Background

Since the start of November 2015, Canada has received over 60,000 Syrian refugees, of whom 27,136 were government assisted refugees (GARs), 26,602 were privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), and 4,912 were refugees supported through a combination of government assistance and private sponsorship under the blended visa office referral program (BVOR) (IRCC, 2018). By far the greatest numbers of Syrian refugees to Canada have arrived in the province of Ontario, in Toronto and the surrounding cities. The following is a presentation of preliminary findings based on thirteen focus groups conducted with Syrian GAR and PSR women and men between December 2018 and May 2019 as part of the research study, *A Partnership Approach to Syrian Resettlement in Toronto and Mississauga: The Role of Social Capital* (2018-2021).¹ This ongoing, mixed-methods project explores the settlement experiences of Syrian refugees in the cities of Toronto and Mississauga, examining how experiences and outcomes may have differed for GARs and PSRs and how other factors such as social networks and gender have influenced these experiences. This study is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant and is a collaboration between researchers from Ryerson University, the University of Toronto, and Sheridan College and six community partners, including the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, CultureLink Settlement and Community Services, Settlement Assistance and Family Support Services, the City of Toronto Newcomer Office, and the YMCA of Greater Toronto.

Methodology

This research applies an intersectional lens to explore the settlement experiences of Syrian GARs and PSRs who have arrived in Canada since 2015 (Randall, 2010; Das Gupta, 2000; Zayzafoon, 2005; Amin-Khan, 2015; Bowleg, 2012), as well as the gendered aspects of these experiences for men and women within these groups (Tastsoglou et al., 2014). Social capital – operationalized in terms of social networks, including presence of family and friends, relationships with sponsors and other community members, connections to ethnic and mainstream groups and organizations,

¹ This summary of preliminary findings has been prepared as a working paper to be presented at the 2020 PETRA Conference.

as well as transnational links with Syrian family and friends outside of Canada (Spitzer, 2007) – is also used to examine the differential experiences of the Syrian GAR and PSR women and men navigating settlement (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2001). These networks are viewed as having the potential to enhance settlement outcomes for refugees based on their capacity to facilitate the flow of information about opportunities and choices, influence individuals who are decision makers, add to an individual’s social credentials, and reinforce identity recognition (Lin, 2001; Houle & Schellenberg, 2010). It is also recognized that, in some cases, refugees rely more on informal systems of support such as existing social networks rather than formal systems of support such as government or non-government organized settlement services (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Caidi & Allard, 2005; Simich, 2004).

Recruitment

Purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2009) were used to recruit participants in the cities of Toronto and Mississauga who were over the age of 18, had been born in Syria, had come to Canada as refugees through either of the privately sponsored or government assisted streams, and had been living in Canada for at least three months. The research team strived to recruit similar numbers of women to men and PSRs to GARs. Overall, the research team experienced more difficulty recruiting men than women; however, the men who participated in the focus groups were ultimately more forthcoming with their concerns.

Focus Groups

In total, thirteen semi-structured, qualitative focus groups were conducted with 123 participants. The participants in the focus groups included 60 PSRs, including 35 women and 25 men; 58 GARs, including 29 women and 29 men; and five additional participants, including four men who had come to Canada through the BVOR program, and one man who was an asylum seeker. The focus groups were conducted in Syrian Arabic by a mixed-gender team of researchers who were fluent in Arabic and English and who were either of Syrian background themselves or had lived experience related to Syria. The focus groups lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, depending on the number of participants in the group, and were separated by gender in order to allow for gender to be used as a factor in analysis. Though the research team aimed to also separate the focus groups by sponsorship category, this only proved possible in eight out of the thirteen focus groups (see ‘Table 1’ for a breakdown of focus group participation), as the research team did not exclude PSR participants who showed up to focus groups intended for

GAR participants and vice versa. This is also how the sample of 123 participants came to include 5 participants who were refugees but who did not fit into the PSR and GAR categories. In order to consistently capture differences in participants' experiences based on sponsorship category, the research team also collected a one-page fact sheet for each participant tracking sponsorship category, age, employment status, highest education achieved, education and training in Canada, and time spent in Canada (see 'Appendix A' for an aggregated profile of focus group participants). All participants received an honorarium of \$25.00 for their participation.

Table 1 – Breakdown of Focus Group Participation

Group #	Gender	Sponsorship Category	# of participants
1	Women	PSRs	11
2	Men	GARs	7
3	Women	GARs	10
4	Men	Mix of sponsorship categories	8
5	Men	GARs	9
6	Women	GARs	12
7	Men	Mix of sponsorship categories	6
8	Women	PSRs	13
9	Men	PSRs	7
10	Men	Mix of sponsorship categories	14
11	Women	Mix of sponsorship categories	12
12	Women	Mix of sponsorship categories	6
13	Men	GARs	7

Focus

group questions were open-ended to allow for participants to express themselves freely, but broadly covered themes such as pre-migration experiences; post-migration supports; the presence or absence of social capital; and settlement outcomes such as employment, housing, and access to services. The focus groups were audio-recorded, and of all of the participants, the GAR men were the most concerned about the audio recordings. Several times during the focus groups, they reminded each other to be careful with what they said because they were being recorded. One of the participants joked about how they should assume that there was a spy in the group, and the interviewers had to reassure them several times that the focus group recordings would be kept confidential.

Data Analysis

Focus group analysis occurred concurrently with data collection (Yin, 1989; Krueger, 1994). Audio-recordings of focus groups were first transcribed in Arabic and the Arabic

transcripts were then translated to English. The translated transcripts were reviewed by different members of the research team to ensure accurate treatment and preservation of the original content of the focus groups. The English transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Coding continued until saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and data was interpreted using grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The participant fact sheets were transcribed directly from Arabic to English and imported into Excel where the data was combined and analyzed to provide an aggregated profile of the focus group participants.

Participant Profile

Most of the 123 participants (65%) in the focus groups were under the age of 45, and more than half of all participants (52%) were between 31 and 45 years of age. Overall, GARs were younger than PSRs, with 76% of GARs being under 45 compared to only 53% of PSRs. While a third of the participants (33%) had at least a bachelor's degree, almost half of the participants (48%) had not completed high school, and 18% had less than a grade 6 education. On the whole, PSRs reported slightly higher levels of education than GARs, with the greatest difference seen between PSR women and GAR women. Sixty-three percent of PSR women had completed high school versus only 24% of GAR women, though there were no significant differences in education between GAR and PSR men participants. Those participants who had participated in trainings or courses in Canada had done so in construction, food handling, customer service excellence, and community service work. Of the few participants who had completed or were currently taking college courses, all had previously completed at least a bachelor's degree. A few participants were currently enrolled in high school courses.

Thirty-four percent of GAR men were employed compared to 16% of PSR men and 20% of PSR women. While fewer GAR men (55%) and women (21%) reported being unemployed than PSR men (68%) and women (29%), it was noted that 62% of GAR women chose to be homemakers compared to only 43% of PSR women. In Syria, the participants in the study had been engineers, technicians, and mechanics; teachers and students; salespeople and customer service representatives; artists; and homemakers. Several participants had owned their own businesses. One participant had been a pediatrician.

The majority (84%) of the 123 participants had been in Canada for at least a year. However, GAR participants in the study had been in Canada longer than PSR participants, with 71% of GARs having been in Canada for more than two years versus only 40% of PSRs.

Findings

Employment

Employment was by far the most pressing issue identified by the participants. The majority of the participants – both GARs and PSRs – were on welfare but expressed a strong desire to work and contribute in jobs which utilized their skills. A participant said about her life in Canada: “I don’t feel like I’ve adjusted to life here because I haven’t worked...unless I’ve worked, I can’t really learn and see what life is like here” (Focus Group 1). Those participants who were employed were in minimum wage jobs (sometimes under the table) which did not offer the minimum protections. In the companies where participants were able to find jobs, the owners tended to be either Syrian or Arab.

Participants frequently pointed to their limited English language skills as a strong impediment to finding employment and building new social connections. Several participants believed that employment could serve as a better avenue for language improvement through socialization than the compulsory English courses they had participated in. Many participants considered these courses to be unhelpful and felt that they held their language skills back, rather than improving their English levels.

Participants also attributed their employment struggles to their lack of employment connections in Canada and commented on the importance of social networks in general to securing employment. For some of those who had been able to find employment, they had usually done so through a family member or a sponsor who had connected them with a reliable company. Many of the participants, men in particular, felt that ‘connections’ were simply a mask for Canadian favouritism. One participant said, “Here in Canada there is nepotism where you need to know someone on the inside to help you; in my case it was someone that was related to my sponsors who employed me” (Focus Group 10). Other participants recognized the need for social connections to find employment but felt that they were less significant in Canada in comparison to their previous country.

Finally, participants frequently expressed frustration at the requirement of Canadian experience and credentials to having their skills recognized in the Canadian labour market. Those

who were adept in trades had often developed their skills through informal apprenticeships, however these were considered insufficient in Canada where licensing was emphasized for skilled labour. Even those participants who were professionally trained, such as those with engineering and medical degrees, found their skills rendered inadequate to be employed in their fields of expertise in Canada.

Housing

All focus groups involved discussions of the high cost of living in Toronto and the surrounding area and the lack of affordable housing. Nearly all participants were dissatisfied with how much of their salaries went to simply paying rent.

Healthcare

Most of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the Canadian healthcare system in terms of the level of care provided and the wait times they experienced. While a few participants liked that healthcare is available for free in Canada, many participants described the former Syrian healthcare system as having been better despite its pay-per-use model because they felt that they had received more immediate and superior care.

Settlement services

No one was unanimous in their praise for all government-funded settlement services; however, some participants found these services to be helpful, and some did not. Similar to their concerns about the language courses, participants said that the employment training courses offered by settlement agencies, especially those in construction, were rudimentary and did not add value. Various men participants who had enrolled in workshops advertised to them as bridging courses in trade jobs said that the lessons focused on teaching tool names in English, rather than providing any practical skills. Several participants also said that their participation in these training programs had been based on a promise of employment which was ultimately not fulfilled: “I did a course in it in this place that we are in right now, and they promised that they were going to give us work, but they didn’t find us work in construction...they were supposed to find me [a job] but they didn’t” (Focus Group 5).

Participants had not received consistent levels of support from settlement agencies. Some participants were especially unhappy with the help agencies provided. One participant described their experience accessing employment services:

They just direct you online. If I don't know how to speak English, why are you directing me to search for jobs online? What's your job? I have to take 3 buses to get to that centre, just so you can set that appointment and make money off of it.

(Focus Group 8)

In contrast, some participants said that organizations were instrumental to helping them navigate their settlement:

[The settlement agency] played a big role with us for a good period of time, and they enlightened us on how to get our permanent residency card and citizenship, and describe what specific areas are like, and what the different areas are called.

They explained to us many things. (Focus Group 7)

All participants shared a desire for follow-up help after the initial first year of settlement and several participants described difficulties navigating needs which were not considered part of their initial settlement phase by settlement organizations: "They told us that we are ready. All of a sudden I'm confronted with something and I find that I don't have anything; I don't have any experience in anything after the year is over" (Focus Group 6).

Family reunification

Family reunification was a common issue brought up by participants. Some participants shared that parts of their immediate families were unable or unavailable at the time of sponsorship to join them in their move to Canada. As a result, participants shared varying degrees of wanting to be reunited with their family members, which ranged from wanting visitors' visas to attempting to sponsor members left behind. Other individuals expressed the desire to sponsor extended family members (in-laws, parents, etc.) based on the level of financial support other family members could provide.

Concern for children

Many participants who were parents discussed concerns about raising their children in Canada. Some participants were finding it more difficult to raise children in Canada than Syria and attributed this to differences in culture. Participants worried about the impact of the new environment on their children and expressed concern that what their children were learning at school and outside the home conflicted with their personal values. Participants also reported struggling with disciplining their children. Participants reported being told that physical discipline is not allowed and being warned that child welfare services would take their children

away. Some participants reported being visited by child welfare workers. Participants reported distress and confusion at the threat of child welfare involvement. Some participants felt that their children now held all the power. One participant said that Canada's approach to child welfare makes it "*easy for the family to fragment and break up.*" Participants worried that child welfare laws gave children too much freedom and indicated that they would like more support with disciplining their children and keeping them safe until they are old enough to be held accountable for their own decisions.

The sponsorship experience

The experience of sponsorship varied greatly not only between GARs and PSRs, but also within each group. A number of PSR families were met at the airport by the sponsors, who provided a great deal of settlement assistance. When the government expedited PSR arrivals, some of the sponsors successfully lined up all the necessary supports for the families in a very short time. One sponsor paid for a family's flights and continued financial assistance even after the first year was over. In one instance, one of the sponsors who spends Canadian winters in Australia, continued follow up with the family. Even after the expiry of the sponsorship period, some of the PSR families keep in touch with the sponsors. Some of the private sponsors assisted in securing employment for the newcomer. The experience with one of the sponsors (a church group) was extremely positive. The group made them feel welcome and provided a course on Canadian life after arrival and took care of all the settlement needs such as driver's licences, health cards, and school registrations for the children. A member of the sponsor group travelled long distances to provide English lessons for a family. A pastor in particular was very helpful and the PSR family benefited a great deal from the supports it received. Some of the PSR men, however, did not experience such positive interactions. A number of them were not met at the airport and the sponsors were unhelpful and demanding. In one case, a PSR family was asked to repay the total sponsorship amount to the sponsor, and another PSR family was asked by their sponsor to pay an entire year's rent (\$25,060.00) in advance. A number of the families had only 'hello' contacts with their sponsors. Some of the sponsors also seemed to have very little knowledge of the backgrounds of the sponsored families at all, as they were asked questions like, "what did you do for a living" (Focus Group 12).

Some PSR women also concurred with the men regarding the support they received from sponsor families, particularly in dealing with government agencies. But other PSR women were

quick to note that their sponsors were very ‘nominal’ and that they failed to honour sponsorship commitments. One of the PSR women suspected that the sponsors were taking advantage of them. Some were skeptical about the benefits of private sponsorship. Lack of geographical proximity was problematic as well, in that some of the sponsors who lived outside the GTA were only able to have intermittent contacts with the sponsored families. One PSR woman felt so overwhelmed by the challenges she faced and fell into depression for a period. On the whole, the experiences of PSRs in relation to the sponsors can be best summarized in the words of one of the participants: “There is an element of luck when it comes to sponsors” (Focus Group 10).

The experiences of GAR men and women with settlement agencies were also mixed. Some had very positive experience with the settlement agency staff who visited them at the hotels and provided a great deal of settlement assistance. On the other hand, both GAR men and women found no help with the settlement agency staff, whose main interest was to scan their Permanent Resident cards for reporting purposes. Some of the volunteers had outdated information. Recent immigrants to Canada seemed to have more information on the initial settlement processes. Social media, especially Facebook groups were a great source of information and connection for some of the GAR and PSR participants.

Discussion and recommendations

Our study findings affirm that social capital plays an important role in making settlement an easier journey for refugees; however, our findings do not suggest that PSRs necessarily possess more social capital than GARs. Some GARs participating in this study expressed that they had more opportunities to form new connections and build networks through the volunteers they met. Conversely, some PSRs participating in this study reported that they had very little support from anyone and had to go about everything on their own. The level of support both GARs and PSRs received depended on the social connections they had in Canada and these individuals’ levels of commitment and settlement knowledge.

Our study findings also reinforce known barriers to labour market entry in Canada. English language skills, prior Canadian experience, Canadian education and credentials, and Canadian social connections operate as a nexus of mutually dependent requirements for entry to the Canadian labour market, creating impossibly high barriers to employment for refugees and risking trapping them into a permanent state of economic marginalization. The GARs and PSRs in this study did not find the settlement services available to them – including employment skills

assistance, employment training programs, and English language courses – to be particularly helpful in overcoming these barriers, and this was reflected in how many of the participants were unemployed and accessing welfare. Especially considering that GARs’ and PSRs’ skills and credentials are already largely not recognized by employers in the Canadian labour market, it is crucial that employment training courses and bridging programs be improved so as not to provide them with more unusable skills.

Our recommendations are as follows:

- Ensure that all private sponsors are provided with consistent orientation about their responsibilities as sponsors and have as much information as possible about the families they are sponsoring.
- Ensure that both GARs and PSRs are provided with consistent pre-arrival orientation about what can be expected upon arrival in Canada and emphasize the importance of bringing records of educational qualifications if at all possible.
- Ensure that employment training courses and bridging programs offer practical skills applicable to the labour market.
- Ensure that refugees participating in training courses and bridging programs are provided with consistent and accurate information about the content of the courses being offered and what they can expect the courses to actually do for them in terms of employment.

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Appendix A: Aggregated profile of focus group participants

PARTICIPANT GROUP	PSR WOMEN : %*	GAR WOMEN : %*	PSR MEN : %*	GAR MEN : %*	OTHER STATUS MEN : %*	PSR TOTAL : %*	GAR TOTAL : %*	WOMEN TOTAL : %*	MEN TOTAL : %*	ALL PARTICIPANTS : %
# OF PARTICIPANTS	35: 28%	29: 24%	25: 20%	29: 24%	5: 4%	60: 49%	58: 47%	64: 52%	59: 48%	123: 100%
AGE										
18-30	4: 11%	4: 14%	4: 16%	4: 14%	0: 0%	8: 13%	8: 14%	8: 13%	8: 14%	16: 13%
31-45	15: 43%	20: 69%	9: 36%	16: 55%	4: 80%	24: 40%	36: 62%	35: 55%	29: 49%	64: 52%
46-60	11: 31%	4: 14%	4: 16%	8: 28%	1: 20%	15: 25%	12: 21%	15: 23%	13: 22%	28: 23%
60+	5: 14%	1: 3%	6: 24%	1: 3%	0: 0%	11: 18%	2: 3%	6: 9%	7: 12%	13: 11%
Unknown	0: 0%	0: 0%	2: 8%	0: 0%	0: 0%	2: 3%	0: 0%	0: 0%	2: 3%	2: 2%
EMPLOYMENT STATUS										
Employed	7: 20%	0: 0%	4: 16%	10: 34%	1: 20%	11: 18%	10: 17%	7: 11%	15: 25%	22: 18%
Homemaker	15: 43%	18: 62%	0: 0%	0: 0%	0: 0%	15: 25%	18: 31%	33: 52%	0: 0%	33: 27%
Unemployed	10: 29%	6: 21%	17: 68%	16: 55%	3: 60%	27: 45%	22: 38%	16: 25%	36: 61%	52: 42%
Student	3: 9%	5: 17%	3: 12%	3: 10%	0: 0%	6: 10%	8: 14%	8: 13%	6: 10%	14: 11%
Unknown	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 4%	0: 0%	1: 20%	1: 2%	0: 0%	0: 0%	2: 3%	2: 2%
HIGHEST EDUCATION										
Grades 1-6	4: 11%	7: 24%	4: 16%	7: 24%	0: 0%	8: 13%	14: 24%	11: 17%	11: 19%	22: 18%
Grades 7-9	3: 9%	7: 24%	4: 16%	7: 24%	3: 60%	7: 12%	14: 24%	10: 16%	14: 24%	24: 20%
Grades 10-12	5: 14%	3: 10%	2: 8%	3: 10%	0: 0%	7: 12%	6: 10%	8: 13%	5: 8%	13: 11%
Secondary School Diploma	5: 14%	2: 7%	6: 24%	2: 7%	0: 0%	11: 18%	4: 7%	7: 11%	8: 14%	15: 12%
Bachelors Degree	17: 49%	5: 17%	7: 28%	8: 28%	2: 40%	24: 40%	13: 22%	22: 34%	17: 29%	39: 32%
Masters Degree	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 4%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	1: 1%
PhD	0: 0%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 3%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	0: 0%	1: 2%	1: 1%
Post Graduate Certificate	0: 0%	2: 7%	0: 0%	0: 0%	0: 0%	0: 0%	2: 3%	2: 3%	0: 0%	2: 2%
Licence	1: 3%	3: 10%	0: 0%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	3: 5%	4: 6%	0: 0%	4: 3%
Unknown	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 4%	1: 3%	0: 0%	1: 2%	1: 2%	0: 0%	2: 3%	2: 2%
ANY EDUCATION IN CANADA	11: 31%	5: 17%	9: 36%	5: 17%	0: 0%	20: 33%	10: 17%	16: 25%	14: 24%	30: 24%
YEARS IN CANADA										
<6 months	2: 6%	0: 0%	3: 12%	1: 3%	0: 0%	5: 8%	1: 2%	2: 3%	4: 7%	6: 5%
6-12 months	9: 26%	0: 0%	3: 12%	0: 0%	1: 20%	12: 20%	0: 0%	9: 14%	4: 7%	13: 11%
1-2 years	9: 26%	6: 21%	9: 36%	10: 34%	2: 40%	18: 30%	16: 28%	15: 23%	21: 36%	36: 29%
2-3 years	10: 29%	16: 55%	8: 32%	10: 34%	2: 40%	18: 30%	26: 45%	26: 41%	20: 34%	46: 37%
>3 years	5: 14%	7: 24%	1: 4%	8: 28%	0: 0%	6: 10%	15: 26%	12: 19%	9: 15%	21: 17%
Unknown	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 4%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	0: 0%	0: 0%	1: 2%	1: 1%

* Percentages indicate the share of participants meeting criteria in each respective participant group rather than with respect to the total participant sample.