



Research and Policy Briefs Series

Bringing Gender into the Analysis of Syrian Refugee Settlement and Integration in Rural Ontario

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Introduction

The refugee settlement and integration process is demanding and stressful, especially for those who are coming from non-English speaking countries. The experiences of refugee women are doubly difficult as they often come as dependent immigrants and face many barriers during settlement.

While there is considerable literature on the settlement experiences of refugees, relatively little is known about the experiences of Syrian families, especially in rural Ontario. This brief engages with existing literature to consider the recent arrivals of thousands of Syrian refugees and particularly the roles and needs of Syrian women who have settled in rural Ontario. It is an initial sketch of my PhD research project, in which I focus on three communities (Guelph, Chatham and Ingersoll) in Ontario and apply a social relational approach to analyzing the settlement and integration experiences of Syrian families in the rural parts of the province. This approach analyzes gender inequalities in the distribution of resources, responsibilities, and power and helps in designing policies and programmes that enable women to be agents of their own development. By first puzzling out an approach to studying Syrian refugee women in rural Ontario, this piece sets the table for identifying strategies that will lead to better outcomes for Syrian refugee families in their settlement and integration in rural Ontario.

Context

Since November 2015, over 40,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada and began the process of integrating into Canadian society (Government of Canada, 2017). An estimated 18,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in over 120 communities in Ontario, with the most concentrated arrival cities being the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, Ottawa, Waterloo, and Windsor (Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2016). However, a small percentage of Ontario's Syrian refugee population have moved to smaller communities (Government of Canada, 2017).

The profile of Syrian refugees indicates that they will face barriers to resettlement and integration in host communities. These barriers are related to Syrian families' demographics, rural communities' unique structure, and the presence or absence of settlement services. The resettled Syrian families who reached Canada typically consist of a couple with three or more children and may also include extended family members (CIC, 2015). It is estimated that 18,770 Syrian refugees have less than a high school education and about 2,100 have graduated from university (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2017). The languages spoken by Syrian refugees include Arabic, Kurdish, Armenian, Circassian, and, less frequently, French and English. In addition, the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims (CIC, 2015).

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Rural Canada is facing population decline due to low birthrates, out-migration, and an aging population. This population decline will have adverse effects at the local and national levels, and immigration is considered one of the solutions to solve this problem (Caldwell et al., 2014). Therefore, the arrival of Syrian refugees to small- and medium-sized cities in rural Canada can fulfill the demographic needs of these areas. However, there are key factors that make rural communities unique in both receiving and retaining newcomers. Rural communities are characterized by two dimensions: low density and/or long distance to density (CRRF, 2015). Distance and density can affect the presence of services for newcomers including infrastructure availability and transportation, diversity in food (e.g. grocery stores), and network structures that attract and retain immigrants (Reimer, 2007). Moreover, particular communities of newcomers exhibit specific needs on the basis of gender dynamics and gender inequalities, as I will now demonstrate.

Using a Social Relational Approach for Studying the Settlement and Integration Needs of Syrian Refugee Women

Given the above, how can we better understand gender dynamics affecting the settlement experiences of Syrian refugee women in rural Ontario? The social relational approach analyzes gender inequalities in the distribution of resources, responsibilities, and power at the household, community, labour market, and state levels (March et al., 1999). Such an approach can enhance our understanding of the experiences of Syrian refugee families in their settlement and integration process in rural Ontario.

At the household and community levels, Syrian society is patriarchal with the family under the authority of the man. Most Syrian women stay at home due to family commitments and, therefore, lack education and work experience. The family is considered the basic unit and each partner has defined roles, with the women's role focused on motherhood and child raising while following men's rules in public places. Men are the bread winners and the 'gatekeepers' of information, resources, and social relationships (Omar and Allen, 1996). Such roles have specific implications for Syrian women and their integration process after migrating. For example, with men as the breadwinner, the gendered division of labour can prevent women from joining training programs, which then impacts labour market participation (Tastsoglou & Preston, 2005). Syrian men are able to establish connections in the wider society and build social networks, but this is not the case for Syrian women. Men are also more likely to gather with friends outside the home, to participate in sports and physical activities, and to attend cultural activities compared to women (AAISA, 2017). As such, Syrian women face significant barriers to integration.

A recent report produced by Agrawal and Zeitouny (2017) documented the settlement experiences of recently arrived Syrian refugees in two Albertan cities: Edmonton and Lethbridge. Respondents in both cities mentioned that language was an obstacle in establishing and maintaining relationships with Canadians and, specifically, women noted they were unable to understand the language. Also, widowed women with children were concerned about what would happen to them

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without male support as they were not used to working outside the home and did not have a profession when they were back home.

Syrian refugee women are willing to work to satisfy their needs and feel a sense of fulfillment; however, they lack the essential skills to join the labour market, such as their low competencies in education and in conversational English. In addition, they lack previous work experience. Furthermore, rural labour markets have limited job opportunities and are highly gendered. Consequently, Syrian refugee women are tremendously challenged when integrating into the rural labour market. Syrian refugee men have different experiences when entering the labour market compared to Syrian women. The working experiences of Syrian refugee men who arrived in Canada are mostly concentrated in occupations such as driving, tailoring, carpentry, and hair styling, and they face the fact that these jobs require certificate to work in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019). Therefore, Syrian men need to join English classes to reach a certain level of language proficiency, which enables them to gain the required certificate after a lengthy process. Consequently, Syrian men who cannot afford to continue English classes had to find work to support their families. In such cases, they were involved in part-time and temporary employment, receiving low pay with no job security (AAISA, 2017).

By coming to Canada, many of the Syrians lost their social capital, and because of the lack of settlement services, emotional and social support is of high importance for refugees in the early years of settlement. Refugees need to build relations with community members and neighbours to obtain information about the community. However, refugees reported that they face everyday racism, and forms of social exclusion in their initial settlement (AAISA 2017). In addition to affecting the amount of social capital that refugee families have relative to their home environment, migration causes changes in household settings whereby women withdraw from the labour market and stay at home. This situation is compounded by patriarchy within households, which limits women's participation in the labour market because men are considered the primary migrants and women follow them (Man, 1995; Raghun, 2017).

Patriarchy within households is mediated by negotiations with state regulations and the labour market (Raghun, 2017). Therefore, it is possible for state policy to either positively or negatively affect the labour market participation of women in the context of resettlement. At the state level, there are no uniform policies that support the particular settlement and integration of Syrian families in rural Ontario. Kabeer (2000) acknowledges that these policies, which are primarily designed by the federal government and, in the case of some areas, by provincial governments, are either gender-blind and exclude women or gender aware and recognize the needs, interests, and priorities of both men and women. An example of gender-blind policy is the legislation to provide workers with a living wage (such as minimum wage). An example of a gender aware policy can be found in Health Canada's commitment to women's health through its conducting of gender-based analysis of all policies and programs. In addition, there has been considerable commitment to applying a gender-based analysis to immigration and refugee policies, but there has been less attention paid within the settlement services sector (CCR, 2006). Consequently, such services fail to satisfy women's needs and result in significant gaps. For example, the presence of relevant

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cultural and religious infrastructure and transportation are important to supporting Syrian families' integration, but these are often lacking in rural communities, which can then negatively impact women.

Conclusions and Next Steps

The literature shows that Syrian women are a disadvantaged group in rural communities. The Social Relational Approach (SRA) as an institutional analysis tool will clarify their situation by identifying the root causes of gender inequalities, such as skewed sexual division of labor and unequal access to basic resources, which may lead to their subordination in rural communities. The findings will help policy makers to design programs that target Syrian women's specific needs in rural areas.

The findings in the literature raise issues about the suitability of rural communities to receive Syrian families, especially when considering the particular gendered needs of this population. As currently constituted, many rural communities lack the required services, supports, facilities, and cultural organizations to successfully integrate Syrian families, which may result in communities losing opportunities to retain such newcomers, revitalize their economy, and address population decline.

For example, the recent movement of Syrian refugees to three communities in New Brunswick may help stall or reverse the communities' population decline. These communities are attractive to newcomers because of the low cost of living and the friendliness of locals. However, Syrian refugees highlighted that they faced barriers in entering the labor market, a situation which, if continued, would result in their leaving the community (Hellstorm, 2018). Moreover, their current situation hinders rural communities' future attraction of newcomers with different backgrounds.

The findings are noteworthy given the current governmental interest in regional development in Canada. However, with limited dedicated federal funding to meet the settlement needs of Syrian families and, in particular, the needs of women (i.e., language training programs and transportation), government policies and initiatives may fail to successfully settle and retain refugees in rural communities. Rural communities need to take steps to facilitate integration by implementing strategies and policies to create welcoming contexts. The programs offered to Syrian families would be more effective if they acknowledge and respond to Syrian families' specific needs. Assessing their needs and ensuring a gender-focused perspective in designing these programs will lead to client-centered and gender-aware programs.

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Author's Biography

Rana Telfah is a Ph.D. student in Rural Studies at the University of Guelph, where she analyzes Syrian refugees in Canada, with a particular emphasis on the settlement experiences of Syrian families in Rural Ontario. Rana completed a Master's of Science in Planning – Rural Planning and Development at the University of Guelph in 2016, with her major research project, “Youth Unemployment in Jordan: Evaluation of the Role of Active Labor Market Programs (ALMPs) in Increasing Job Opportunities for Young Rural Women in Jordan.” Rana moved with her family to Canada in 2012 after having previous working experiences in Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Jordan. Rana can be reached by email at rtelfah@uoguelph.ca

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