FROM CRISES TO CONTRIBUTIONS: SYRIAN SUCCESS STORIES

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In 2015, Canada's federal government launched the Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative, as a response to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in that country. Over the span of just 15 months, more than 40,000 refugees were resettled across the country with the support of government services and private sponsors. Operation Syrian Refugees involved a collective, government-wide effort and although it was led by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), it involved the collaboration of five federal departments as well as local communities responsible for resettlement post arrival.[1]

Data gathered from the 2015-16 Syrian Refugee Resettlement Initiative shows that resettled refugees landed in more than 350 communities across Canada.[2] The experiences of this cohort of Syrian refugees were documented through a national study conducted by the Environics Institute for Survey Research, based on in-depth interviews with 305 individuals from this cohort.[3] This study reveals that refugees not only initially struggled with culture shock and trauma, English and French language proficiency and acquiring basic necessities, but they have also have continued and prolonged difficulties encountering adequate and fulfilling employment. Even five to six years later, when most Syrian refugees expressed satisfaction with their lives overall, employment continued to be a problem for many. For example, 95 percent expressed satisfaction with their safety and security, 84 percent felt accepted by local community members, 73 percent felt satisfied with local schools, 72 percent felt they had access to needed health care and 63 percent of those surveyed felt

1 Leah Hamilton, Luisa Veronis and Margaret Walton-Robert, eds., *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 331.

2 Jennifer Hyndman, "Geo-scripts and Refugee Resettlement in Canada: Designations and Destinations," *The Canadian Geographer/Le Géographe canadien* 66, no. 4 (2022): 653-668. https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12785

3 Environics Institute for Survey Research, *Syrian Refugee Lived Experience Project* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2022), www.environicsinstitute.org/docs/default-source/project-documents/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project/syrian-refugee-lived-experience-project---final-report.pdf?sfvrsn=fa2b421d_2

that they had access to adequate housing. Fewer than half (44 percent) of those interviewed were very or generally satisfied with their employment situation: a situation that is all too common among newcomers to Canada as the comparisons with other countries show.[4] The refugees' lack of satisfaction related to their employment situation gains importance when compared to other satisfaction indicators.[5]

After six years in Canada, only one in four (26 percent) refugees were working full time, compared to 49 percent of the non-retired Canadian population ages 18 and older. In addition, they were more than twice as likely, at 18 percent of the refugee population, to be unemployed and looking for work when compared to 8 percent of Canadian nationals.[6] Full time employment was more common among refugees with post-secondary education and those with previous work experience in Syria, while older refugees (ages 45 and above) were most likely to be unemployed and looking for work. For Syrian refugees who were fortunate to be employed, most were working in sectors offering entry-level jobs such as transportation and warehousing, retail trade, accommodation and food services, and construction. Just one in five (21 percent) said their current or most recent occupation fully matched their education, skills and experience.

In broad strokes, this research document demonstrates how the programs and services developed by governments, settlement sector organizations and Canadian citizens have made a critical difference in the resettlement process of Syrian refugees. At the same time, the study signals that these newcomers have not been supported especially well when it comes to ensuring they can find meaningful employment and suggests that this lack of support presents a barrier to achieving a long future for themselves and their families in Canada. The ensuing case studies focus on Syrian refugees' workforce-related experiences; the stories they tell help shape the way we understand employment within the newcomer framework.

WHAT IS SUCCESS?: A SYRIAN REFUGEE'S PERSPECTIVE

Integration into the labour force has long been a measure of the general effectiveness of immigrant resettlement pathways and of newcomers' satisfaction and well-being understood broadly.[7] Despite the initial struggles associated with the arrival and the frequency of lived trauma, refugees have shown surprising success over time in their economic integration. Research demonstrates that although the economic earning of refugees is on average lower than that of other immigrant categories and of Canadian born nationals, these differences often decline after 10 years.[8] This is in large part due to the values and decision-making practices of refugees. For example, newcomers place significant importance on homeownership – an essential means of building personal equity – and can quickly breach traditional barriers in the housing market by building social capital, enabling the pooling of resources, sharing of living space and increased opportunities for employment and professional networking necessary for the initial purchase of real estate.[9]

The barriers that refugees, and immigrants face, in general, when entering the workforce shape how their successes are understood. Additionally, they are and filtered through resilience, problem solving, and increased cross-cultural competency. For this reason, integration into the labour market clearly does not capture the complexity of success as it relates to newcomers and refugee populations, in particular. In the case studies below, we return to the Syrian Refugee Project of 2015-16. The demographic profile of Syrian refugees differed from other refugee arrivals in Canada. On the one hand, Syrians had larger family sizes – 40 percent had four to six family members, and another 9.8 percent had seven or more. On the other hand, of the Syrian refugees who entered Canada through the Government Assisted Refugees (GAR) program, 60 percent under the age of 18.[10] These demographic particularities suggest that age and family life will shape how Syrian refugees gauge their success in Canada into the future.

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4 In recent years, Canada's immigration strategy has been compared to Australia's. Both countries are regarded as leaders in the global relocation of skilled immigrants. Harrap et al., argue that the ability of Australia's federal government to support policy in favour of foreign credential recognition and drive employer-centric strategies has allowed this country to surpass Canada as the model nation for skilled immigrant resettlement (2). See Cukier for a detailed analysis of the skilled immigrant case in Canada.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Yuqian Lu, Marc Frenette and Yasmin Gure, "The Long-term Labour Market Integration of Refugee Claimants Who Became Permanent Residents in Canada," *The Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, November 12, 2020, Statistics Canada. www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020018-eng.htm

8 Lisa Kaidaa, Feng Houb and Max Sticka, "The Long-term Economic Integration of Resettled Refugees in Canada: A Comparison of Privately Sponsored Refugees and Government-Assisted Refugees," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 9 (2020): 1687–1708. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1623017

9 Bronwyn Bragg and Daniel Hiebert, "Refugee Trajectories, Imaginaries, and Realities: Refugee Housing in Canadian Cities," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 16-32.

10 Leah Hamilton, Luisa Veronis and Margaret Walton-Robert, eds., *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

SUCCESS AS UNDERSTOOD BY YOUNG REFUGEES

Ghamr Saeed was 16 years old when he arrived in Canada with his family in 2016.[11] Together they had fled their home country of Syria by way of Dubai and resettled in Kingston, Ontario. Shortly thereafter Saeed began attending a local high school where teachers spoke to him about university and asked about his career goals. Two years later, he was named the recipient of one of ten national scholarships to the University of Toronto. Ghamr recognizes that the expectations for his future are high, but he welcomes the challenge along with all of the support he has received from teachers and community members.

Nour Abdoulah left her home in Syria shortly after the war began in 2011 and eventually landed in Canada as a refugee in 2017.[12] For her, success is tied to the future, and to the ability to chase one's dreams. As a competitive swimmer and dedicated university student, enrolled at the time of the interview at Carleton University in Ottawa, Nour dreams of a future where she is committed to sports and competition, and is able to share her life close to family and friends. The destruction and sadness caused by war in her home country forced her to make the difficult decision to relocate with her brother, and leave her older sister behind. She dreams of a future when they can be together again.

As a grade nine student, Mouhamad Alaarab fled Syria in 2012.[13] He describes the experience of being homeless and spending three years living in a tent in a refugee camp in Lebanon as difficult for a large family, such as his own. Mouhamad later arrived in Canada as a refugee and, at the time of this interview, was a university student studying Aerospace Engineering. He believes that anything is possible and recognizes that hard work and perseverance bring success into arms reach.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: DEFINING SUCCESS FOR YOURSELF

Peace by Chocolate was a family business that served the Middle East and Europe with its homemade chocolates for 30 years.[14] But like so many others, the routines and traditions of this family enterprise came to a halt with the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2012. Shortly after their chocolate factory was destroyed, the family fled to Lebanon, where they spent the next three years in refugee camps. Their future changed when they were invited by the Canadian Government to immigrate to Canada. Settling as refugees in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, the family has rebuilt their small business and today remains committed to satisfying sweet tooths from across the globe. Their trademark "One Peace won't hurt" along with their Syrian flavors tell a story of struggle, sadness, and hope from a new home.

By 2020, over 1000 Syrian refugees had settled in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Assaf Alhamade left Syria in 2012 with his wife and two daughters and spent the next five years in Lebanon.[15] In 2017 they received an invitation from the Canadian Government to resettle as refugees and shortly thereafter arrived in Saskatoon. Despite the difficult transition, Assaf quickly found work in the cement and stone industry, as he had years ago in Syria. Since then, the Alhamades have made a place for themselves making meaningful connections with local families through newcomer service providers like *the Open Door Society* and with already established immigrant communities of Arabic descent. For Assaf, these connections have not only helped his family live well in their new country, but have also provided a unique opportunity to contribute to the local economy. In 2016 Assaf Alhamade opened the Al Rabih Brothers Market, a grocery store stocked with Middle Eastern flavours.

In Syria, *Tayybeh* means both "kind" and "delicious." For a small group of women in Vancouver, British Columbia, it has shaped a business model centered around community formation and cross-cultural communication.[16] For Nihal Elwan, an Egyptian-British permanent resident, *Tayybeh* was the name she had given to the pop-up dinners that she helped coordinate in support of recently settled refugees from Syria. Together she, and fellow organizers, would sell tickets to intimate private dinner functions hosted by a group of women

11 Mark Postovit, "Transplanted Syrian Teen wins National Scholarship," *Global News*, March 26, 2018, https://globalnews.ca/news/4106948/transplanted-syrian-teen-wins-national-scholarship/#:~:text=Eighteen%2Dyear%2Dold%20Syrian%20newcomer,to%20the%20University%20of%20Toronto

12 Hodman Ali, "Refugee Voices: Inspiring Stories of Young Refugees in Canada," *Local Story News Releases*, February 21, 2020, UNHCR Canada. www.unhcr.ca/news/refugee-voices-inspiring-stories-young-refugees-canada

13 Ibid.

14 Peace by Chocolate, "About Us," accessed September 1, 2023. https://peacebychocolate.ca/pages/our-story

15 Mandy Vocke, "Seeking a Better Life, Syrian Refugees find Success Living in Saskatoon," *Global News*, December 23, 2020. https://globalnews.ca/news/7540025/syrian-refugees-success-saskatoon/#:~:text=Tareq%20Nila%2C%2023%2C%20has%20also,scary%20moving%20somewhere%20completely%20different.&text=Despite%20challenges%2C%20Nila%20has%20adjusted%20to%20the%20Canadian%20lifestyle

16 Alexandra Wrage, "A Syrian Success Story," Forbes, August 28, 2017. www.forbes.com/sites/alexandrawrage/2017/08/28/a-syrian-success-story/?sh=67d76b70232e

refugees. The dinners were announced on social media and around the local communities and featured authentic cuisine, Middle Eastern ambiance, and an opportunity for strangers to share space, food, and conversation. Since its conception in 2017, *Tayybeh* dinners have been a huge success and have developed into a food truck catering business and an ambitious line of culinary products. Its success reflects the dedication of their chefs and owners to learn how to manage a business for themselves, in addition to the routine struggles of refugees and life in a new country. It also reflects a community eager to support their international neighbours as they settle into their new homes.

Slieman al-Jasem had never cleaned a fish until meeting Kendall Dewey, owner of Prince Edward County's Lone Lake Ontario fishery, one year earlier.[17] Now, Mr. al-Jasem is working with Kendall and Joanne Dewey to learn the fish processing business in order to bring Dewey Fisheries into the future and continue offering the local communities' fresh seafood. At 21 years of age, Slieman is a motivated, fast learner who is eager to make his home in Canada after leaving Syria in 2015. Kendall learned of the al-Jasem family's arrival in a TVOntario documentary and reached out to Slieman's private sponsor to offer him work. Together they worked with the *Prince Edward County Learning Centre*'s Inspire Youth employment program to train the young refugee to scale and fillet the local fish. After the 17-week program, Slieman now works directly with restaurants, local clients, and, with his brother, operates multiple stands at Farmers markets across the region. Alongside the watchful eye of his mentor, Kendall Dewey, Slieman has become an efficient fish processor and is learning new skills to help him manage accounts, process payments and track deliveries and orders. The young refugee looks forward to a successful career that helps him contribute to his family and to the local Lake Ontario economy.

EMPLOYING SYRIANS FOR SUCCESS

Jim Estill is president and CEO of Danby Appliances in Guelph, Ontario.[18] In 2015, after having seen images and read stories of the suffering caused by the war in Syria, Estill began sponsoring families in their resettlement process. In collaboration with the "Ease into Canada" Program, Estill and Danby Appliances have sponsored more than 87 families by providing them with employment and initiating their education in English as a second language during their first 90 days in Canada. Whether the families decide to stay and continue to work at Danby, they develop important cultural competencies and real workplace experience that serve newcomers in a tangible way. While refugees are able to develop a support network, Estill and other leaders within Danby Appliances serve as mentors that guide community building within their local context.

The IKEA *Refugee Skills for Employment initiative* works with the unique situations of newcomers in order to create individualized pathways for career advancement.[19] In collaboration with ACCES Employment, the program provides paid work placements, career mentoring, and cultural and language coaching to refugees who struggle as they transition to living in a new country, often far from family and friends. As part of a global campaign to connect with the exceptional talents of newcomers, the program aims to shift narratives around refugees and build knowledge both within IKEA and beyond, centering on the important place the experiences of refugees have in our community.

In 2017, Starbucks Canada made a commitment to hire 1000 Syrian refugees over a period of five years.[20] The organization is attracted to newcomer populations, regarding them as resilient, loyal, and talented. Refugees are often highly educated, while also possessing significant work experience from their home countries, which aids in retention efforts in Canada. In collaboration with *Opportunity Youth* and other government and local agencies across the country, Starbucks has developed a hiring program to address Canada's disconnected youth population. In it, strategies such as leadership meet and greets, provide streamlined pathways to employment where candidates can learn about the organization and share their own experiences in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Partnering with *Hire Immigrants* and other refugee serving entities, Starbucks Canada will employ similar strategies to welcome refugees into their organization. Programs like this are important to building a diverse workplace and developing a culture of care across the company. And while Starbucks looks to strengthen itself internally, this initiative connects refugees to extended benefits such as tuition reimbursement, and dental, vision and mental healthcare.

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17 Camilla Cornell, "Syrian Refugee, Fisherman's Friend: How a Retiring Couple Found a New Heir to their Lake Ontario Business," *Globe and Mail*, July 31, 2018, www.theglobeandmail.com/business/small-business/managing/article-syrian-refugee-fishermans-friend-how-a-retiring-couple-found-a-new

18 Lauren La Rose, "Meet the Canadian CEO Sponsoring and Hiring Refugees," *UNHCR Magazine*, October 13, 2019. www.unhcr.ca/news/homegrown-entrepreneur-jim-estill-refugees-fresh-start-canada

19 IKEA Canada, "IKEA Canada Partners with ACCES Employment to Create Pathways to Success for Refugees," *IKEA Canana Corporate News*, August 31, 2021, www.ikea.com/ca/en/newsroom/corporate-news/ikea-canada-partners-with-acces-employment-to-create-pathways-to-success-for-refugees-pubccd17ca7

20 "Starbucks and the First One Thousand," Hire Immigrants, accessed September 1, 2023. https://hireimmigrants.ca/stories/starbucks-and-the-first-one-thousand

SUCCESS THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

Nabil Al-Dabei arrived in Canada as a Privately Sponsored Refugee (PSR) in 2016. After a member of his sponsoring group discovered his ability to fix cars, Al-Dabei was quickly invited to work small shifts of one hour a week at a local body shop in Ottawa's West End. His part-time job soon turned into full time work where Al-Dabei's supervisors and colleagues showered him with praise. "'He's an excellent worker, Nabil,' says Gaetano Frangione with Bemac, 'and I always say I wish we could get at least another 10 employees like Nabil. The new generation today, nobody wants to learn the trade where they're going to get their hands dirty.'"[21]

In a tourist industry struggling to find employees within Atlantic Canada, newcomers represent an opportunity to meet these immediate needs. For Amer Sankari, a recently arrived refugee from Syria, the openings in the hotel industry represent a dream to learn and grow, and the chance to contribute and make a difference.[22]

In 2016, Reham Abzaid arrived with her husband and two children.[23] As Government Assisted Refugees (GARs), the family was brought from a Jordanian camp and resettled in St. John, New Brunswick. While the federal government provides financial assistance for the first year of their stay, Abzaid's new neighbourhood grocery store welcomed them with shelves stocked with tastes from the Middle East, recently added as a show of support to the over 600 Syrian refugees who now share their community. Reham is young and is committed to her future being in Canada. After her arrival in New Brunswick, she made time to take the English lessons offered to her at the local YMCA and has since developed enough language proficiency to help others as the community centre's translator. With her husband also working full-time as a mechanic, Abzaid attributes her family's successes to their inquisitive nature, their insistence on asking questions and getting explanations, and their explicit search for help within the community.

Madhi and his wife Subhiya had well developed careers in Syria prior to arriving in Toronto in 2016. Subhiya worked as a Social Worker at the same local school that her children attended.[24] Mahdi was a well-established dentist and had worked at a clinic for 18 years. When the conflict came too close to home, they relocated to a neighbouring city. Different from other friends and family members who had left Syria over the years to study and work abroad, and more recently fleeing the dangers of war, the Nassif family had too much to lose and did not take "starting over" lightly.

Mahdi, Subhiya and their children arrived in Toronto through a privately sponsored initiative coordinated by Toronto Metropolitan University, then known as Ryerson University. Having only arrived with what they could carry, Mahdi and Subhiya enrolled their three children in school and themselves in English language classes. Together they decided that Mahdi would prepare for equivalency exams in order to bring his extensive experience in dentistry to their new home. Mahdi recalls that "Learning the word for teeth in English was an important first step for me to become a dentist in Canada." Together, the family made sacrifices that allowed him to study day and night, seven days a week for the next three years. Today, Mahdi is a dentist in Newfoundland. His family is comfortable and happy, and they are planning for the future. Subhiya is looking to return to school and to work, and, together, she and Mahdi are evaluating/contemplating homeownership.

CONCLUSION

Research shows that, overall, the employment experiences and outcomes of Syrian refugees in Canada are disappointing and that more needs to be done to ensure they have pathways to employment and social mobility. A range of factors including discrimination, lack of recognition of foreign credentials, informal processes and challenges in navigating, social capital, language skills are some of the notable factors that have been identified as challenges/roadblocks. Nevertheless, there are many shining examples of success and ways in which Syrians who came to Canada as refugees have made important contributions. Their experiences must inform our next steps. More research is needed to understand the factors which shape their success in rural as well as urban areas and how we can remove obstacles and provide supports.

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