SUPPORTING REFUGEE WOMEN: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN LANGUAGE AND SETTLEMENT PROGRAMS, POLICIES AND RESEARCH

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Systemic barriers affecting refugee women's participation in settlement programs have come to the attention of service providers, policy-makers, and researchers nation-wide. Yet, there is still much to be understood about the impacts of trauma, lack of childcare, and inflexible classroom environments on the long-term integration of newcomer women. Drawing upon grounded examples from the settlement sector, this article reflects on how the gendered dimensions of access to learning opportunities are affecting the resettlement of refugee women in Canada.

Les obstacles systémiques qui affectent la participation des femmes réfugiées aux programmes d'établissement ont été portés à l'attention des fournisseurs de services, des décideurs et des chercheurs à l'échelle nationale. Pourtant, il reste encore beaucoup à comprendre sur les répercussions du traumatisme, du manque de services de garde d'enfants et des environnements de classe inflexibles sur l'intégration à long terme des femmes nouvellement arrivées. En s'appuyant sur des exemples fondés du secteur de l'établissement, cet article examine comment les dimensions de genre de l'accès aux possibilités d'apprentissage affectent le réétablissement des femmes réfugiées au Canada.

Last year, Canada's highly publicized acceptance of over 40,000 (IRCC 2017) refugees reignited cross-country conversations amongst academics, policy-makers, and practitioners around how to keep up with the demand for settlement services. However, many of these conversations failed to take into account the particular needs of refugee women. Unfortunately, this is not a new trend, as female migrants have historically been left out of such exchanges. Research in the North American context has shown how voices of refugee women are not typically incorporated in research, planning for ser-

vice provisions, and policy design (Goodkind & Deacon 2004).

The Metropolis Conference in March 2017 confirmed that on-the-ground accessibility of settlement programs for women is a pressing issue nationally, as per the presentation on Customized Services for Immigrant Women (Drew, Kinzel, Mubashir, & Ngoga 2017) and Trauma Informed EAL Program for Refugee Women (Jeffries & Wilbur 2017). Service providers from across Canada presented evidence to suggest that refugee women face multiple barriers attending programs that do not meet their childcare, family commitment, and social needs. Such exclusions can have far-reaching consequences across many different aspects of a refugee woman's life, and must be assessed not in isolation, but from the perspective of their interactional effects.

In the context of today's increased numbers of migrants and the spike in refugee claimants seeking asylum in Canada (CBC 2017), this longstanding issue has become particularly noticeable in the area of language programs, where women struggle with lack of childcare, mental health support, and classroom flexibility.

Settlement service practitioners have observed a number of systemic barriers that refugee women face in trying to access language classes and this is further exacerbated for female refugee claimants.

Diana Jeffries (D. Jeffries, personal communication, 2017) cites an example of how a refugee student from a Language Instruction for Newcomers in Canada (LINC) program struggled with the strict attendance rules. The student was anxious about losing her seat in her LINC class and had therefore left her five-year old child at home so she wouldn't miss the class. When the school learned the child was home alone, the mother was asked to go home to her daughter. She agreed only because she received assurance from the school that her spot would not be taken from her due to her absence.

Though the mother in this situation was striving to learn English since she wished to find employment and was not intentionally neglecting her child, there was discussion among the LINC staff as to whether social services should be informed that the child had been left at home unattended. The teacher in this situation was unable to offer support or flexibility to the mother because of the mandatory LINC attendance rules of only two absences per month.

Dr. Amea Wilbur's research reveals (Wilbur 2015) that these are common barriers (policy and practice) within language programs. Typically, refugee women are the primary caregivers within families and struggle with meeting strict policies around attendance and punctuality. Due to the long wait lists for LINC classes, women who struggle with home life demands are often asked to withdraw from classes if their attendance expectations are not met.

Student attendance expectations and long waitlists to get into language classes aside, many refugee women are also unable to accept places in LINC because the majority of classes do not provide a childcare option. When classes offer childcare on-site, the 18-months to 5-year-old age restriction can be limiting for women with children outside of this age bracket, as observed with the newly arrived Syrian families (Glowacki 2016). Many women have therefore been directed towards the daycare system as a solution. However, childcare fees are expensive, even for mid-income Canadian families, and are usually not a viable option for refugee children. Although program staff often suggest informal methods of childcare through kin networks, many refugee women face isolation, without the extended family or trusted friends to help with childminding needs.

The impact of trauma on learning is another substantial issue affecting refugee women's participation in language classes. The losses most refugees suffer pre-migration, which are often exacerbated by poverty, grief, and the struggles of literacy, education, and language in new home countries have been well researched (Carswell, Blackburn, & Barker 2009). However, there has been less research on the impact of trauma on learning, and how to support English language learners who have suffered trauma on multiple fronts. The few exceptions to this include the seminal work of Horsman (1999) and Isserlis (2000), who address how trauma can impact learning and program planning for adult students. A recent article by Amea Wilbur investigated how English as an Additional Language (EAL) instructors are finding they need more assistance, training, and resources to support refugee populations in the classroom (Wilbur 2016). Nonetheless, there is still much work to be done, since the curriculum and training for most publicly-funded EAL classes do not contain a framework for teaching students who have experienced trauma.

Trauma experienced as part of a refugee woman's forced migration to Canada can impact the student's abilities to participate, recall information, attend classes, and do well on tests and assessments. When instructors are unfamiliar with the impact of trauma on student learning, they often misread symptoms as disengagement, poor effort, and incompetence. Furthermore, students who have experienced trauma may be re-traumatized by policies and practices that do not create inclusive classroom learning. Therefore, additional teacher education in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) training programs are necessary to support teachers who are working with refugee populations.

In some cases, women-only learning environments are also needed to facilitate refugee women's participation in settlement programs. Co-ed classrooms can be a barrier for learning because of the discomfort or unfamiliarity with learning in male and female classroom. Co-ed classes can also deter some women from fully engaging in learning simply because of the traditional expectation that men's learning needs will take pre-

cedence over women's, and therefore women can sometimes feel less inclined to engage in classroom activities.

Additionally, topics such as women's health, domestic violence, self-care and parenting in a new country are not typically covered in co-ed spaces. Resources shared in LINC classrooms are not targeted to include programs and referral information specific to the needs of refugee women, which tend to differ from the general immigrant population and from refugee men.

The integration process for refugee women is often slow because of the gendered constraints of childcare, classroom flexibility, and a lack of understanding of trauma. Therefore, many individuals remain in isolation for years without learning English or being able to contribute their skills to the Canadian workforce. On a daily basis, this inhibits a refugee woman's ability to communicate with her children's teachers, take an active role in her child's education, make friends, and integrate socially, culturally, and economically into Canadian society. In many cases, mothers become dependent on their children or husbands for translation and economic security, leading to long-term impacts on their lives stemming from a lack of integration.

In a climate where the numbers of displaced persons fleeing war, persecution, and economic instability are unprecedented (UNHCR 2017), Canada has been seen as a beacon of light for upholding the rights of refugees on a failing world stage (Austen 2017). However, as evidenced by the gendered challenges refugee women face outlined in this article, it is necessary that Canada re-think how to best support and include vulnerable refugee women in resettlement programs. Refugee women are important contributors in our society, and it therefore costs us economically and socially to overlook the important roles they can play. In order to assist newcomer women in reaching their full potential, Canada must ensure that the design of settlement programs are not inadvertently overlooking their particular needs and excluding their participation. A combination of research, policy, and training is needed to bridge the current gap in accessibility of language programs for refugee women. At present, the impact of trauma on refugee women's learning remains a critically understudied area. Research into the combined relationships between gender and displacement, and the impact of these factors on resettlement and learning opportunities would assist policymakers and practitioners in developing holistic programming for refugee women. Such research efforts, however, must be combined with support from policy-makers to target evident needs in the areas of childcare, language class attendance flexibility, and women-only programs. Within classrooms, training is needed to assist instructors in understanding students who have experienced trauma as well as classroom practices that may better support them. As apparent from the discussions at the Metropolis 2017 Conference, the needs of refugee women relating to language are finally coming to the attention of service providers, researchers, and policymakers. Through the combined efforts of these parties, refugee women will be able to access language programs more easily, leading to smoother and improved integration and far-reaching impacts on the lives of newcomer families in the long-term.

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