RETHINKING REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA: ADDRESSING DISPARITIES AND UPHOLDING INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

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Canada's refugee resettlement process, though reflective of its commitment to human rights and multiculturalism, reveals significant disparities based on racial and national backgrounds. This article critically examines Canada's approach, particularly in the context of the contrasting treatment between Ukrainian refugees and those from Africa and the Middle East. Drawing insights from studies and organizations like Healthy Muslim Families, it highlights systemic discrimination in housing and employment faced by refugees. The article advocates for a more equitable, inclusive resettlement framework that aligns with Canada's international obligations, ensuring all refugees receive equal and fair treatment.

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As a country that prides itself on a multicultural identity and a commitment to human rights, Canada's approach to refugee resettlement is a testament to these values. Yet, beneath the surface, the resettlement process reveals significant discrepancies that challenge these ideals, particularly when viewed through the lens of racial or national backgrounds. This article delves deep into the complex dynamics of refugee resettlement in Canada, enriched by insights from pivotal studies and service providers such as *Healthy Muslim Families*. The article aims to highlight the discrimination faced by refugees from diverse origins and propose an enhanced framework that better aligns with Canada's international obligations.

CANADA'S RESETTLEMENT FRAMEWORK AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Resettlement involves the organized transfer of refugees from the country where they have sought asylum to another country that has agreed to admit them, grant them permanent residency, and eventually offer them the opportunity to obtain citizenship. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, Canada commits to protecting refugees from persecution, an obligation rooted in both international law and Canadian values. However, the application of these principles has been inconsistent, often varying significantly based on the refugees' country of origin, revealing a selective approach to humanitarianism.

Resettlement starts with UNHCR coordinating with resettlement countries like Canada to identify refugees most at risk and facilitate their safe transfer. To be selected for

resettlement, refugees must be registered with UNHCR or state authorities in their asylum countries. Canadian visa officers then assess the referred refugees to determine their resettlement needs and conduct thorough medical, criminal, and security screenings. Once admitted, resettled refugees gain permanent resident status in Canada and, after meeting residency requirements, can apply for Canadian citizenship.

In Canada, refugees referred for resettlement by the UNHCR are typically admitted under one of two main programs: The Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR) program or the Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR) program. Those admitted under the GAR program receive financial support from the Canadian government for up to a year post-arrival. Alternatively, the BVOR program involves a unique partnership between private sponsors and the government, where costs and responsibilities are shared. Private sponsors, including groups of Canadians and organizations such as faith-based associations, ethnocultural groups, or settlement organizations, provide social, emotional, and settlement support for twelve months, with financial responsibilities split evenly over the first six months with the government.

This comprehensive system is Canada's structured approach to refugee resettlement, highlighting Canada's commitment and the complexities involved in integrating vulnerable populations into Canadian society. The collaboration between governmental and non-governmental entities in these programs reflects a community-driven effort to support newcomers. However, disparities in the execution and accessibility of these programs leave much room for improvement, suggesting the need for ongoing evaluation and reform to ensure equity and effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of all refugees.

DISPARITIES IN TREATMENT AND PROCESSING TIMES

The Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET), implemented swiftly in 2022, marked a significant achievement in facilitating the rapid entry of over 100,000 Ukrainians into Canada. This initiative not only expedited their access to work permits and healthcare services but also stood as a globally recognized demonstration of effective humanitarian assistance. However, the expedited support extended to Ukrainian refugees sharply contrasts with the protracted and challenging resettlement process experienced by refugees from other regions, particularly those from Africa.

Documentation from the Canadian Council for Refugees, specifically the Nairobi Statement, sheds light on the extensive delays encountered by African refugees at IRCC offices. It highlights a glaring disparity in processing times when compared to other regions. The statement reveals that refugees in Nairobi may endure waits of up to 56 months from identification to departure for Canada. Such delays not only profoundly impact their safety and mental health but underscore a systemic issue that extends beyond mere administrative backlog.

The differential treatment and experiences of Ukrainian refugees, when contrasted with those from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, and Chad, reveal a broader pattern of inconsistency and selective efficiency. The immediate mobilization of support for Ukrainian refugees in the early stages of the crisis demonstrated Canada's capacity for rapid response – a stark contrast to the bureaucratic inertia faced by refugees from other nations, who have been left to wait indefinitely.

This discrepancy was poignantly highlighted by a Sudanese refugee's observation: "We see others moving quickly through the system, but we feel forgotten, as if our lives matter less.[1]" Such sentiments, widely shared among refugees from less-publicized crises, spotlight the urgent need for reform in policy that ensures equitable treatment for all refugees, irrespective of their origin.

The evidence above points to Canada's undeniable capability to streamline and expedite the resettlement process. However, this capability must be applied more uniformly and equitably, aligning with the nation's international obligations and humanitarian commitments to truly embody the spirit of universal compassion and support.

SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION IN HOUSING AND EMPLOYMENT

Upon arrival, many refugees face the dual challenge of navigating a complex housing market and encountering significant barriers to employment. The "Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness" report highlights that a significant majority of refugees spend over 30% of their income on housing, with many experiencing hidden homelessness due to high costs, which are exacerbated by discrimination based on race, religion, or family size. As refugee families arriving in Canada do not have a credit history, references, or a stable source of income, housing becomes a major stress. This stress is further exacerbated by discrimination from landlords due to larger family size, unstable income, and lack of funds for deposits.

1 Bejan, Raluca, Maria Mallet-Garcia, Richard Lipinski, Chi Do, and Victoria Wolf Aviles. *A Tale of Two Contexts: The Ukrainian and Afghan Refugee Crises in Canada and the UK*. Dalhousie University & University of Oxford, 2023.

Moreover, the lack of awareness among refugees about their rights further compounds these issues. Many are unfamiliar with tenant rights or employment rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation. This gap highlights the urgent need for more robust educational programs that empower refugees to advocate for themselves effectively.

The detailed findings from Preston's (2011) report provide insight into the scale of these challenges. The report notes that more than 80% of newcomers spend over 30% of their income on housing, which is considered beyond the affordability threshold. It also identifies that a significant number of asylum seekers and sponsored refugees with large families often live in overcrowded conditions that exacerbate their risk of homelessness. Many report that their housing is poorly maintained and unfit due to issues like mold, vermin, and insect infestations. While asylum seekers and refugees report the most severe housing difficulties, the Preston report surprisingly notes that three-quarters of other immigrants also struggle with unaffordable housing. These difficulties persist even among those who have been living in Canada for 5 to 10 years.

This discrimination extends to employment as well, with the pervasive "Canadian experience" requirement often sidelining skilled refugees into unemployment or underemployment. Many refugees come with skills, higher education, and experience in their field. However, resettled individuals find it difficult to secure appropriate employment due to limited fluency in English and the non-recognition of professional credentials obtained from their country of origin. As a result, they are often forced to take lower-skilled positions that do not match their qualifications.

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS REQUIRED TO REDUCE DISCRIMINATION

To combat discrimination effectively in the resettlement process, both governmental and non-governmental organizations must collaborate more closely. Government agencies must take the lead in policy reform, ensuring that their initiatives are inclusive and actively counteract discriminatory practices. For example, they could implement oversight mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the equitable treatment of all refugee groups, ensuring that programs like CUAET are not exceptions but models for all resettlement efforts.

Non-governmental organizations, including community groups and advocacy organizations, play a critical role in supporting refugees on the ground. They can offer tailored services that address specific cultural and language needs, which are often overlooked in government programs. NGOs can also serve as a bridge between refugees and government services, facilitating access and understanding.

ENHANCING INTEGRATION THROUGH POLICY AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

The evidence suggests that the successful integration of refugees requires a multifaceted approach. According to one study, refugees benefit significantly from programs that address specific barriers at various ecological levels, from personal to systemic.[2] This approach supports not only immediate needs but also long-term integration, including job training programs that recognize foreign credentials and skills.

Community-based initiatives also play a crucial role. For instance, local agencies and groups partner with legal experts to provide workshops on rights and responsibilities in Canada, ensuring refugees understand how to navigate the complexities of the legal and housing systems. Additionally, increased funding for employment mentoring programs can link newcomers with established Canadians, fostering networks that enhance employment opportunities and social integration.

DISPARITIES IN RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT CRISIS

The CUAET visa program, initiated in response to the Ukrainian crisis, functioned almost akin to a resettlement program by offering Ukrainians temporary residence, work permits, financial aid, and comprehensive integration services. This facilitated a swift and broad humanitarian response, allowing a significant number of Ukrainians to establish a temporary but stable life in Canada with an open pathway toward longer-term residency.

In stark contrast, the treatment of individuals from conflict zones like Gaza and Sudan highlights a significant disparity. While the Ukrainian program was expansive and inclusive, offering extensive support and rapid processing, the programs available to Gazans and Sudanese have been far more limited. These programs are often restricted to those with existing family ties in Canada, provide minimal financial support, and include stringent caps on the number of applications accepted. Furthermore, additional invasive security screenings for Gazans and delayed processing exacerbate the challenges faced by these populations,

2 Janzen, Rich, Melodie Taylor, and Rebecca Gokiert. "Life Beyond Refuge: A System Theory of Change for Supporting Refugee Newcomers." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 38, no. 2 (2022): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40892

underscoring a differing approach that appears less about immediate humanitarian relief and more about controlled, limited intake based on bias and political interests. This variance in treatment raises questions about equity and the consistent application of humanitarian principles.

CONCLUSION

As Canada continues to welcome refugees from across the globe, it must ensure that its settlement process not only meets immediate needs but also tackles deeper issues of racism and discrimination. Reflecting on these challenges and the real-life stories of the individuals we assist, it becomes increasingly clear that while Canada can expedite resettlement processes, this capability needs to be applied more uniformly. Every day, the resilience and determination displayed by refugees beginning a new life in Canada inspires the work of frontline workers and service providers, driving us to advocate for a more inclusive and supportive resettlement framework.

Thus, the journey continues – not only for the refugees seeking a new beginning but also for advocates and organizations committed to making Canada's celebrated multicultural mosaic a reality that truly includes everyone. As we move forward, we must keep pushing for a system that upholds the dignity and rights of all individuals, ensuring that Canada remains a global leader in humanitarian response and a true sanctuary for those in need.

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