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"Can Someone Help Me?" Refugee Women's Experiences of Using Settlement Agencies to Find Work in Canada

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Abstract
This article examines refugee women's experience with settlement agencies and their employment outcomes in Canada. Based on qualitative data, we found that employment was not a priority to settlement agencies with many counselors referring the women to low-skilled, low-waged positions with companies with whom they had pre-existing ties. Meanwhile, counselors found themselves burdened with large workloads and felt inadequately equipped to serve the needs of refugees. Through this study, we propose policy recommendations that address women's disproportional barriers that can be integrated within programs and services offered by settlement agencies to improve employment integration.

Keywords Refugees · Employment · Settlement agency · Gender · Canada

Introduction

In response to the Syrian civil war, which resulted in the deaths of roughly 470,000 Syrian natives and forcibly displaced millions more, the Canadian Liberal government committed to resettle 25,000 refugees by the end of 2016 (Liberal Party of Canada 2015; Rodgers et al. 2016). This mass undertaking, labeled as the #WelcomeRefugees initiative, required collaborative partnerships between all levels of government, religious and community groups, private citizens, and settlement agencies to ensure that

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incoming refugees experienced a safe and secure settlement process (Kenny and Mamuji 2019).

Settlement agencies in particular were critical to the settlement process, serving as a central hub for newly arrived refugees and supporting governmental needs and targets given that these agencies are funded through government contracts. However, these agencies have historically been designed to assist immigrants as an overarching group, often not differentiating refugees. As well, a core component of settlement is employment and while settlement agencies provide assistance to find work (Thomas 2015), little is known about this process as experienced by refugees.

The purpose of this study then was to explore the employment integration experiences of refugees accessing settlement agencies, focusing on the case of Syrian refugee women in Canada. Particularly, our goal was to examine the effectiveness of these agencies in securing employment for refugee women, the quality of jobs offered, the programs and services provided by agencies in preparation for labor market entry, and refugee satisfaction with the employment services rendered.

The paper is organized as follows: we begin with the context of refugee labor market integration by reviewing research grounded in Canada and elsewhere followed by settlement agencies as intermediaries to employment. This context will lend to the research objectives and methodology used to ascertain the objectives. Then, we tease out the specificities of refugees accessing settlement agencies in terms of the quality of employment-related services, strategies to access employment, and employment opportunities presented. We conclude with a discussion that situates the findings in the broader construction of settlement agencies and offer recommendations for improvement.

Refugees and Employment

Canada has a complex infrastructure in place to accept refugees (Labman 2011). Refugees can arrive under four main streams—government-assisted, privately sponsored, blended visa office-referred, and refugee claimants—with variations in how each stream is supported and the types of services provided (for a detailed description, see Senthanar et al. 2019). Briefly, with the exception of refugee claimants, all other refugees typically receive income supports for up to 1 year and have access to federally funded programs (e.g., language classes). Conversely, refugee claimants are not received or supported by anyone when they arrive in Canada and rely on word-of-mouth or existing family and friends for information (Yu et al. 2007).

Employment is a key priority of incoming refugees especially as income supports come to an end; however, they often have a difficult time entering the labor market. Refugees' unemployment rate remains high in Canada (nearly double) when compared to other immigrant groups and, when they do secure employment, may take several years to converge (in terms of income) with Canadian workers (Bevelander and Pendakur 2012; Wilkinson and Garcea 2017). Across the EU, refugees fair slightly better, with unemployment rates below 20% but still double that of native-born (Liebig and Tronstad 2018).

Commonly cited barriers to Canadian labor market integration include non-recognition of foreign credentials (Creese and Wiebe 2012; Este and Tachble 2009; Guo 2009; Lacroix et al. 2015; Li and Li 2013; Raza et al. 2013), fewer social support

networks (Hyndman 2011; George et al. 2012), lack of language proficiency (Chase and George 2013; Fuller and Martin 2012; Frank 2013; Grenier and Xue 2010; Stewart et al. 2008), and Canadian work experience (Baffoe 2010; Jackson and Bauder 2013; Wilkinson et al. 2016). Comparable jurisdictions in the EU (Ghorashi and van Tilburg 2006; Tomlinson 2010; Frykman 2012; Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Liebig and Tronstad 2018) and Australia (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006; Kosny et al. 2017a) have reported similar refugee employment experiences as those found in Canada. In their study of refugees in the Netherlands (arriving from Iran and Afghanistan), for instance, Ghorashi and van Tilburg (2006) found language was the frequent cause of exclusion from employment. However, the authors linked exclusion within the broader context of cultural difference and "image of migrants" as dissimilar to Dutch persons, making it harder to secure a job. Similarly, refugees arriving in the UK described being treated as a stranger when experience and qualifications were not recognized (Tomlinson 2010). In Australia, newcomers used strategies to minimize their culture, such as remove non-Australian work experience, as a way to gain access to the labor market (Kosny et al. 2017a). Yet, many workers still found themselves in poor-quality jobs characterized by racialized discrimination and harassment.

While many of the employment-related obstacles that refugees face are shared with other immigrants, refugees tend to face these barriers more acutely. Particularly, the migratory process which can include time in refugee camps, in transit between neighboring countries, and prolonged asylum claims can interrupt education, careers, and career building, resulting in substantial periods of unemployment (de Jong 2018) as well as atrophy of their skills (Hooper et al. 2017).

Refugees, Employment, and Settlement Agencies

In Canada, settlement agencies provide programs and supports directly by governments or through public institutions and non-profit providers, often in partnership with governments, to assist newcomer populations establish themselves. Governments typically offer contracts to settlement agencies due to the agencies' local scale, flexibility, knowledge of refugee-receiving communities, and their ability to respond to emerging issues in an efficient manner (Chekki 2006; Elliott and Yusuf 2014). Terminology used outside Canada, yet withstanding the same basic tenets, include integration services, and immigrant service sector, as well as migrant support service sector (Bauder and Jayaraman 2014; de Jong 2018). These agencies are often considered the intermediary between a newcomer and their new community (Awuah-Mensah 2016), targeting both immediate and long-term needs. Immediate needs can include help with housing, healthcare, or day-to-day necessities (e.g., transportation, banking) while long-term needs address social and economic integration, including employment.

Research indicates that the settlement sector has undergone neoliberal restructuring over the past few decades which refers to the incorporation of market-based regulation into social policy (Kenny and Mamuji 2019). Here, performance measurement, fiscal constraint, and increased competition for contracts are emphasized (Hood 1990). The effects of neoliberal restructuring are particularly pronounced with service provision and quality. Settlement agency staff experience high client workloads, increased responsibilities, and less autonomy which often means that newcomers are placed in

poor-quality jobs not aligned with their previous skills and education, with little to no follow-up on their employment outcome or experience (Kosny et al. 2017b). The disadvantaged position of refugees, as described previously, extends onto settlement agencies to provide employment assistance contingent on their needs and experiences, even though that is not always the case.

Specifically, refugees accessing these services may be more inclined to take on any position offered out of pressure to support family members when income supports cease (Kosny et al. 2011). A recent study on newcomers, of which a third were refugees, found that newcomers were hesitant to speak up about their health and safety concerns at the workplace since the jobs were leveraged through connections between settlement agencies and employers, and workers felt they needed to be grateful (Yanar et al. 2018). In a similar study, a comparison between newcomers recruited from settlement agencies and Canadian-born workers found that newcomers were more likely to be placed in temporary jobs and experienced significantly higher levels of empowerment vulnerability than their Canadian counterparts (Lay et al. 2018). Here, empowerment vulnerability is issues with reporting hazards in the workplace out of fear of jeopardizing employment. Settlement agencies are also known to employ a one-size-fits-all delivery model that does not account for the differential needs of refugees (Evans and Shields 2014). Particularly, while other immigrants may *choose* to leave their country for positive reasons and usually are able to plan their entry into the host country, refugees are *pushed* out in a rushed nature due to war conflicts and fear of persecution (Segal and Mayadas 2005). In homogenizing the experience of refugees and immigrants, settlement agencies may offer programs and supports that do not match refugee background, skills, and experience, thus affecting their employment outcomes.

Further, refugees accessing these services not only report finding low-waged, low-skilled positions (Lauer et al. 2012) but also issues inherent to access and outreach. In an evaluation of the resettlement initiative delivered to the Syrian cohort, for instance, nearly three quarters of government-assisted refugees reported minimal knowledge around employment agencies and so, did not use them (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC] 2016). This was echoed by interviews with service providers who believed that promotion of services was lacking among newcomers leading to low uptake (IRCC 2018). As a result, refugees may lack a basic understanding of the job application process in Canada (Stewart et al. 2008) including how to communicate effectively with employers (Thomas 2015) and steps required to upgrade credentials for an employment position if need be (Zuberi and Ptashnick 2012).

In Canada, there are over 1200 settlement agencies available of which roughly 380 focus directly on employment-related services. Here, newcomers can get help on resume writing, job searches, mock interviews, and referrals to employers, as well as access to volunteer or intern placements, to name a few. Despite their large presence, the role of settlement agencies in influencing employment outcomes of refugees in particular is less established in the literature. This is concerning given the large influx of Syrian refugees in the past 2 years (nearly double the average acceptance; Statista 2017) and Canada's promise to resettle more refugees in the coming years, many of whom will access settlement agencies for employment.

As part of a broader program of research examining the employment integration experiences of Syrian refugee women, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured

interviews with Syrian refugee women and key informants to examine challenges to seeking and securing employment. Refugee women were chosen as the population of interest since they are usually inexperienced in the workforce either by choice or due to cultural norms (Franz 2003) and typically take on low-waged, low-skilled positions out of financial necessity (Young and Chan 2015). Women also encounter double (Oxman-Martinez et al. 2005; Dyck 2006; Reid and Ledrew 2013) and triple day (Premji and Shakya 2017; Liebig and Tronstad 2018) when unskilled paid employment, domestic responsibilities, and volunteer roles intersect forcing the women to juggle multiple competing demands. Consequently, women may experience challenges disproportionately and provide a unique opportunity for research in the post-migration context.

A recurring topic of this research was the role of settlement agencies on employment integration. Thus, the objective of this paper was to explore refugee women's experience with using settlement agencies and how this shaped their employment experience.

Methods

This study was guided by feminist grounded theory (Wuest 1995). Feminist grounded theory combines feminist postmodern inquiry with grounded theory and postulates that women's experiences vary according to different characteristics (e.g., social position) and so, there exists multiple truths that need to be explored (Allen and Baber 1992; Wuest 1995). Women are considered knowers and a legitimate source of knowledge; thus, any generated hypotheses emerge from, and is tied to, their rich accounts, rather than preconceived notions (Glasser and Strauss 1967; Wuest 1995).

A critical premise of feminist grounded theory is its concern with social change and/or social transformation. As Acker et al. (1991) explain, "understanding the processes that result in inequalities is a necessary step toward changing women's position". Accordingly, rather than simply describing what is occurring, a conceptual picture of why and how something is the way it is becomes apparent. In this study, through interviews with refugee women and key informants, we wanted to know the women's experience of finding work. Participants discussed challenges and barriers to employment, competing demands in and outside the home, and the role of settlement agencies in these experiences.

Recruitment and Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit refugee women and key informants through a wide array of outlets. Briefly, an email outlining the study was sent to settlement agencies in the Toronto and Kitchener-Waterloo region, with whom we have pre-existing ties, for the purpose of identifying Syrian refugee women and gauge interest of settlement staff in participating. Referred and eligible women and interested key informants were provided with information letters which described the study objectives, how to participate, and privacy and confidentiality issues. We also recruited women through social media (Facebook) and posted fliers (in English and translated to Arabic) at venues frequented by newcomers (language classes, family centers, community centers, etc.). A snowball approach was subsequently used with key informants, with individuals providing the names and contact details of other potential key

informants to seek out. Lastly, we employed cold calling and emailing to settlement agencies outside the research team's network to recruit participants.

In total, we recruited 20 Syrian refugee women and 9 key informants. At the time of interviews, the women were either actively seeking work, occasionally looking for work, currently working (albeit in precarious positions), or had given up searching for work all together. Since we were interested in Syrian refugee women, we sought participants arriving on an ongoing basis since the onset of the civil war in 2011. We found that women typically arrived within the past 2.5 years which coincides with the large influx of Syrian refugees accepted in Canada at the end of 2016. Given that income supports typically end 1-year post-arrival, we recruited participants who had been in the country for a minimum of 1 year arriving through any of the four refugee streams. The women were pre-screened by a screening questionnaire to ensure they were over the age of 18 and able to provide consent. No limitations were imposed on marital status, number of dependents, or language. That is, women who were single, married, widowed, with or without dependents, and who could either speak English or Arabic were included.

Key informants in this study were individuals who worked in settlement agencies in the community with knowledge around refugee populations. These positions included employment counselors, program managers and administrators, and upper managerial positions such as directors. Employment counselors provided help with employment support (e.g., job search) while program managers described their role as research, design, and evaluation of programming. Meanwhile, upper management was responsible for operational aspects of the settlement agency and could speak more toward expected deliverables and funding schemes.

Among the women, some variation was achieved across the refugee streams with 12 women arriving as government-assisted, 4 privately sponsored, 2 blended-visa, and 2 refugee claimants. The women had a range of educational backgrounds with most having elementary (n = 4) or high school (n = 9) and some having either attended university/college (n = 4) or obtaining a university/college degree (n = 3). Prior to arriving, three quarters of the women held jobs whether in Syria or neighboring countries such as Lebanon or Turkey. These positions varied from chefs and artisanal crafters to teachers and travel consultants. Tables 1 and 2 provide more information on the Syrian women and key informants, respectively.

Interviews

One-time, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants between March and September 2018. The interviews took place at a time and location convenient to the refugee women and key informants, such as by phone, by place of employment, or in a café, and lasted between 30 min and 2 h. Most interviews with the women (12) were conducted in Arabic and required the presence of an informal interpreter during the interview. The interpreter worked in the settlement sector and arrived in Canada before the war. A small stipend was provided for her time and dedication to the study. Refugee women were given an honorarium of $25 in appreciation of their time as well as feedback letters with our contact details should they wish to reach out with further questions, concerns, or to obtain study results.

Table 1 Syrian refugee women sociodemographic information

	Syrian women (n = 20)	
		Number (%)
Age	18–25 years	5 (25)
	26–45 years	10 (50)
	46–65 years	5 (25)
Language spoken	English	8 (40)
	Arabic	12 (60)
Resettlement stream	Government-sponsored	12 (60)
	Private sponsorship	4 (20)
	Blended-visa referral	2 (10)
	Refugee claimant	2 (10)
Length of time in Canada	1–2 years	11 (55)
	More than 2 years	9 (45)
Pre-migration work status	Not working	5 (25)
	Working	15 (75)
Work status in Canada	Not working, not looking for work	6
	Not working, actively searching for work	8
	Working	4
	Given up looking for work	2

The interviews with refugee women focused on their experience of looking for work, challenges encountered, and the usefulness of settlement agencies in streamlining the process. Key informants were asked to describe their experience of helping newcomers economically integrate, structure, and provision of existing programs within their organization and perceived difference in services between immigrants and refugees.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. In the case of Arabic interviews, English interpretations of responses were transcribed. An iterative process between data collection and data analysis was

Table 2 Key informant sociodemographic information

Key informants (n = 9)			
Pseudonym	Gender	Type of organization	Role
Joshua	Male	Non-profit employment agency	Founder and CEO
Iines	Female	Non-profit, ethno-specific organization	Program manager
Karina	Female	Non-profit ethno-specific organization	Employment counselor
Sada	Female	Non-profit ethno-specific organization	Executive director
Jackie	Female	Non-profit settlement organization	Employment counselor
Marie	Female	Non-profit employment agency	Employment counselor
Lisa	Female	Non-profit settlement organization	Project director
Barb	Female	Non-profit women's settlement organization	Senior manager
Farzana	Female	Non-profit women's settlement organization	Senior manager

employed for refinement of analytic focus over time. This back-and-forth process allowed for issues arising in one interview to be integrated in future interviews and helped inform recruitment of subsequent participants. Detailed field notes were also written after each interview to describe the encounter, note observations of meeting context (e.g., interaction and behavior), and record analytic insights.

Analysis

A modified, grounded theory approach was used to systematically organize interview data and identify themes (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory analysis proceeded in a feminist way. To begin, an initial coding framework, consisting of inductive and deductive codes, was developed using a representative number of transcripts. Each code was accompanied by a brief definition and how it relates to the research aims and objectives. Careful attention was paid to ensure selected codes considered the women's social positions and identities and how these simultaneously interact to shape their employment experience. We were also sensitive to power dynamics explicitly expressed by the women or observed analytically. For instance, codes focusing on service, supports, and programming available to refugee women through settlement agencies were tied to gendered divisions of paid and unpaid labor. In this analysis, unpaid labor refers to work done in and around the household to maintain family members and/or a home (Shelton and John 1996). This can include childcare, cooking, cleaning, and various kinds of emotional labor. Research on the gendered divisions of unpaid labor at the intersections of race/ethnicity and immigration is limited; however, some evidence suggests culture primarily determines gender role and others point to economic resources and practical constraints that shape housework (Pinto and Coltrane 2009; Coltrane and Shih 2010).

The initial coding framework was discussed and refined as the study progressed and applied to interview data using NVivo qualitative software (QSR International 2014). Any new emerging codes from data were back-coded to transcripts. Once all interviews were coded, code summaries (a summary of each code within and across interviews) were created to distill findings and were constantly compared across and within data to systematically link and develop key themes.

This study received ethical approval from the University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. No personal identifiers were used in this study and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Findings

Through the analysis, three main themes were identified that capture the Syrian refugee women's experience of using settlement agencies to find work. The women described being frustrated with employment services, if provided at all, which did not take into consideration their individual contexts. As a result, they found themselves pushed into long-term trajectories of low-waged, low-skilled, precarious, and feminized positions that did not reflect their education and experience. These positions were often leveraged by settlement agencies who had pre-existing relationships with employers centered on funding partnerships.

Quality of Contact with Settlement Staff for Employment Help

Settlement agencies are typically the first stop for refugees to get information on many immediate necessities such as housing and leads to support for other services including employed-related advice. In our sample, nearly all of the women (19 of the 20) sought out these services yet many described how settlement staff were not interested in helping them find paid work. Instead, they found themselves going through a pre-determined script or checklist with settlement workers that focused on self- and family care, and day-to-day necessities (e.g., health appointments, grocery, banking), and rarely touched on employment.

> …they [settlement agency] just focused on like, finish all your things that you need, you know, like the ones the government need from you, all the about the health care and stuff like that. Yeah, they would take us to our appointments, the dentist, and they finish all of these. It's a long process, like three, four months to finish it. It's a lot like we would go to the dentist like every single day for like a month. They told us a lot about this kind of stuff…[like] how to rent a house. But about job, you know, no. They didn't talk about [employment]… (Bella, working part-time in food services).

In Ontario, settlement workers typically do not need to undergo any sort of formal training to assist newcomers. Rather, the agencies themselves may decide to provide basic in-house training to staff. Some key informants further suggested that women arriving from certain countries with gender-specific norms and attitudes are less inclined to look for work and, this belief coupled with informal training, may have led to the checklists the women described.

If the women tried to sway from the script to address employment, they were met with resistance.

> So the government give them like a list to do. [But] our needs is not just like house or furniture. We have like beyond this. I made a request [with] the caseworker – can you help me with this [finding a job]? She would say this is not part of my job description. I cannot do it. So I ask her would they make a referral [to someone who can help]. She said, it's not my job description (Alia, unemployed; interpreter translated).

Given that the guaranteed 12 months of income supports were ending, many of the women were eager to start thinking about employment opportunities. They described how their initial intake counselor referred them to partner organizations or agencies in the community versus providing employment assistance on site. This was challenging for the women, many of whom did not have access to transportation, making the travel between organizations long and difficult.

> Okay so beside the financial support, we had a caseworker to give us information about transportation, how to use the grocery stores, and how to use to your VISA and bank card. They gave other resources if we are in the situation we need support with foodbank. Also they took us to the [employment agency], a resource

> for us… [But] transportation is very expensive. [I ask her how do you come to the employment center to get help]. [She said] I walk. From my school to the center is a 3 kilometer walk. I walked all the way from far… (Amine, unemployed; interpreter translated).

In addition to limited mobility, the participants described social barriers reflecting their gender role. For instance, a small number of refugee women in our study did not hold paid employment positions in their home country and, instead, stayed at home to care for their large families (on average the women had 5 to 6 children) while their husbands worked. Upon resettlement in Canada, these women did not arrive with their husbands, some of whom stayed back to safeguard their home or care for extended family. A lack of formal work experience, unfamiliarity in the host country, and social isolation is thus greater in these women, yet employment counselors routinely used the same checklists with all their clients. For instance, these women described how they went through the process of making a resume and discussing jobs they might be interested in with employment counselors; however, when it came time to apply to jobs they were referred to, counselors assumed the women would know how. The one-on-one support the women were looking for was ultimately missed.

> Okay I come to the [employment agency] twice a month. I have appointment, then we sit down with the counselor for one hour sometimes two hours, using the computer, looking for a job and [after applying] no answer… They turn the computer off and I go home and nothing happen. And this is what happen every appointment. I want to find a job to be able to cover the expenses and the needs… There is no organization taking care of our specific situation. They have to sit down with us and look at our skills. What's our career [goal], our skills, and how to overcome the barriers (Alia, unemployed; interpreter translated).

The lack in follow-up and routine structure of helping with job searches can partly be attributed to large workloads of settlement workers. Key informants in our study, mostly those in employment counselor positions, were often burdened with large influxes of newcomers in their waiting rooms, some with appointments but most coming as walk-ins. As some of the women described, the concept of scheduling a time to meet with someone was foreign to them since, in Syria, you can simply show up at a place of business or even a neighbor's house unannounced. Consequently, employment counselors found themselves having to "process" a large number of clients in a short timeframe, as Jackie, an Employment counselor, describes:

> …my work load is 40 clients a month, and I kind of make notes to myself, and sometimes it's pressing things that I need to follow up on and sometimes it's not…It's hard because I wish I had a smaller work load…I was just having this conversation with a client because he was really frustrated. He has so many different people that he's working with, and he's like there's no one person dedicated to helping me from A to Z, it's very fragmented. He has a housing worker with [housing organization], he has me an employment counselor, working with three different people, the English teachers. So he was frustrated that his housing worker wasn't doing certain things for him. I was explaining to him

> that's not within the scope of her work. She probably has a large work load, and I was trying to explain to him it's the same thing with me.

To alleviate workloads, key informants described some of the changes they would like to see in the resettlement system to better assist newcomers. Marie, for instance, an Employment counselor at an employment agency, recalled the days when she had help from "transition assistants" that provided newcomers with the in-depth assistance they demanded while removing barriers relating to training, language, and culture at the same time.

> Well, I think one of the things is that we had funding very soon after that huge influx [of Syrians] came for what we called, "transition assistants"…So those transition assistants were, not only in language, but they also interpreted culture. They were available to go out and do job coaching or give explanations of job shadowing, and that was really good… But in a way it was too soon because, you know, it was like that's when the influx came.

Transition assistants can be thought of as cultural mediators—individuals that shared a common background to the women and so were able to help them navigate the integration process. Employment counselors noted that while they wanted to support all newcomers, underfunding and limited resources meant prioritizing those individuals that were "job ready" which, for the most part, was not refugee women.

Strategies Employed by Settlement Actors to Facilitate Labor Market Entry

Participants described numerous migration-related barriers to employment including language proficiency, discrimination, and lack of extensive social networks. The women's initial encounter with settlement and employment agencies further highlighted their thin work history and, at times, educational background (more than half had high school or less education) that can be applied in the workforce. This sometimes meant gearing the women to take on any position available under the premise of "gaining Canadian work experience." These included volunteering roles, informal employment facilitated by sponsorship groups, and participating in programs offered by settlement agencies.

Volunteering

The women described how settlement staff encouraged uptake of volunteer work to overcome labor market barriers such as lack of language proficiency. Oftentimes, however, the positions were precarious in nature and unlikely to lead to long-term employment prospects leaving the women to question the practicality of volunteering:

> So, I work in a clothing store. I organize shelves, I run some clothing, hang. Sometimes I go the storage downstairs, but it is only two hours every Thursday in the morning… Two hours for me is not good enough. So I asked if someone can help me also at the [employment center] to find a volunteer opportunity. [They] told me we cannot…(Bahar, unemployed: interpreter translated).

Practicality of volunteering was an especially pervasive theme among the women with small children who arrived in Canada without the childcare support they depended on (e.g., childcare from grandparents). These women tended to prioritize the needs and well-being of their children over gaining experience and oftentimes placed volunteering on the backburner. For instance, some women expressed intention to volunteer after their youngest child started school and others were hoping to volunteer at their children's school if possible.

Additionally, some women felt there was a job-skill mismatch with volunteer positions offered. For example, women with teaching degrees were working as childcare assistants and younger women who were transitioning into college or university were offered roles in coffee shops. Others felt the mismatch more acutely when having to balance volunteering and their job search with family obligations. For instance, Fatima, a once thriving hair salon owner in Syria, described the challenges she faced with balancing competing demands of having to take care of her elderly, ill mother (something she was not used to since in Syria she had the help of her family, friends, and neighbors) with what she felt was a menial volunteer position. She goes on to explain how the guidance she received from settlement staff essentially discouraged her from taking up hair styling at the time.

> Whenever I express my intention to find a job, everybody tell me language [is an issue]… [Now I volunteer] but they never let me do everything for a customer. For example, I can support the hair stylist for part of highlight. I'm the assistant, not the main person who is doing everything (interpreter translated).

Skills Assessment Geared Toward Informal, Feminized Positions

Refugee women who were supported in part or entirely by sponsorship groups had a slightly different experience than the other women in our study. This relationship is highlighted since sponsors are key actors in the settlement process and often engage with settlement agencies to appropriate care. The women, including privately sponsored and blended visa, reflected on how, in an attempt to get to know them better, their sponsors would inquire into their background, hobbies, and activities. While the women were grateful for the interest the sponsors took in their well-being, the sponsors tended to gear the women into informal entrepreneurial roles that were highly feminized. For example, Febe, a business owner in Syria, recalled her experience with her sponsors and how the process played out:

> …my sponsor asked me some question, to find out what's my skills, what do I like to do and if I like to start work or not. Then they decide to buy me a sewing machine and they share with their friends and network about my skills. And they encourage people to come to me to fix a dress, pants. So they come for small thing, and then they [sponsors] find I'm very skilled. They bought me fabrics so now I [can] start from scratch… cutting and sewing… (interpreter translated).

These positions are unrealistic in the sense that they are burdened with barriers relating to financial support (e.g., bank loans) as well as lack of access to resources that

included business licenses, facilities to hold their businesses, personnel to help with marketing, and the like. In fact, nearly one half of the women reported barriers to starting their own business, with financial support hindering all their prospects. Additionally, the women were largely unaware of how to promote their business, whether it be selling Syrian delicacies or providing tailoring services, and instead relied on their sponsor networks for quick sales and profits. This approach was limited in that it was supported through the goodwill of sponsors and their connections rather than a solid business plan. Similar to booking an appointment to meet with a counselor, the concept of licensing to operate a business was also foreign to most women. Many arrived with the preconceived notion that businesses can operate the same way they did in Syria. For example, Febe contrasts the situation in Syria and Canada when she tried to open a tailoring business:

> … In Syria, we had an apartment in the fourth level so, on the main floor we opened our business. We did the same in Turkey. We rent apartment and we open our business…[But here] too many regulations (interpreter translated).

These roles were however better suited for older women in our study who tended to have greater difficulty learning English or participating in a job search. Older women had a longer pre-migration tenure in paid employment and were not interested in "starting over." When provided the opportunity to engage in informal income-generating activities, albeit in feminized sectors, they viewed it as a chance to supplement their income supports and pass some free time.

Settlement Programs

Key informants mostly from ethno-specific agencies, agencies that cater to a specific ethnicity such as Arab, saw the viability of informal, feminized roles in the Canadian labor market as positive and actually promoted them through the programs offered at their organizations. These programs functioned on the principle of creating a "social enterprise" for the women where they could practice English and network with other women who shared the same or similar background. For example, Sada, an Executive Director at an ethno-specific agency, spoke about the benefits of a catering group her organization started for newcomer women:

> …there is a need for that [Syrian cuisine] in terms of employment to encourage the Syrian women to get their opportunity… we have this program, we call it a [name of program], and we run it at the church where we invited the congregation of general public to attend cooking classes and it was the Syrian refugee lady who was teaching them how to cook different meals. It was very successful, and after that they started contacting her, asking her for cooking something, or catering an event or something like that. But for them [Syrian women] there is a good need and a good opportunity to succeed.

Although the women showed interest in certain sectors because these jobs would allow them to set their own schedules and work around the needs of their family (e.g., drop-off and pick-up of children), access to other programming was largely limited to skilled

immigrants such as those entering Canada as economic immigrants. Many of the program managers described how there is programming available to assist newcomers gain more technical skills and branch out into higher waged positions; however, refugee women rarely met the eligibility criteria. For instance, Farzana's women's settlement agency partnered with a local college to offer free upgrading courses which would eventually lead to enrollment in a program of the women's choosing at the college if they passed. To be accepted into the program, however, the women needed to pass a standardized test which meant having good English proficiency. In the end, of the 25 enrolled women in the program, only skilled immigrants were accepted while not a single refugee was eligible. Similarly, Karina, an Employment counselor, described the difference between refugees and skilled immigrants and how that translates into different programming and thus employment outcomes:

> So these women [non-refugees] with better computer skills and office skills, they are referred to this program [name of program]…We get four positions every year [to the program]… [But] most of them [refugee women] because of their low language skills and then their general skills…for sewing, general labor, restaurant work [are not referred to the program].

Finally, some settlement staff felt that programming should be designed around the immediate concerns of newcomers such as family health and education. Employment programs were secondary and often required collaboration between organizations due to budgetary constraints. In the case of multi-purpose settlement agencies, organizations that help with an array of services (accommodation, language training, health care access), employment programs followed a basic curriculum which included resume building and job search techniques.

The Nature of Settlement Agency-Employer Ties

The women's experience with settlement agencies shaped their employment prospects, and this relationship was mediated by pre-existing ties with employers in the area. Since many were arriving with low language levels, and financial constraints, among other barriers, the women were often limited in their job opportunities and so referred to low-skilled, low-waged positions by self-interested settlement agencies. Almost all of the organizations in our study relied on provincial or federal funding to remain operational which meant they needed to strategically partner with external organizations. As Iines describes below, her organization is constantly trying to make employer connections in the community which she believes is a win-win for her and newcomers:

> …we have our own connection with a private sector who—community businesses that they are looking for a new employees and then because the language might be very hard for them [refugees] to get introduced to the main stream job opportunities. So, what we do, we are sending them over [to the businesses] where the language is not very hard for them [lower language requirement]… This is how we build partnership with our private sector and they are helping us securing jobs for the newcomers.

These partnerships however usually come with a catch. The positions are typically subsidized, half paid by the employer and the other half by the organization or government, with no room for advancement and often in positions the women take on out of financial necessity. Bella, a young, willing, and soon to be college student, describes her frustration when her settlement counselor pushed her into such a position and then ultimately was dismissive to her requests for a better job.

> …they gave us list of the jobs… It's just restaurants and all the bad place that I don't want to work like all the fast food…I said I'm not interested in all of this, I want you to find something else. Like I just spent the whole march break with you guys to find a job for me, and you didn't do anything. They were like if you're interesting in this job, we can help you. You know why they can help me with this specific job? Because they know the manager and they can talk to them, and they just going to hire me like immediately. I said I want to work with malls. She [settlement worker] was like okay if you want to work in malls, it's kind of hard. [She said] If you want this job, you can have a job. If you don't want this job, we can't find a job for you like in the place that you want. I was very mad.

Despite the fact that some women in our sample were highly educated, had some language proficiency, and had prior work experience, many of the employer connections provided to these women by agencies were in labor positions. This translated to a downward occupational trajectory for the women. In this quote, Jackie describes downward occupational move in the context of refugee men but she relates the scenario as similar to women as well:

> So, I'll get somebody who's a plumber for example back in Syria, and now all I have is, because he cannot work as a plumber in Canada or a mechanic, or whatever, you name it. Now all I have is a job at a factory so it's like there's that discrepancy.

The jobs offered were also largely gendered, with women sent to food, tailoring, or factory jobs while, according to both the women and settlement workers, men were offered trade positions. Beyza, a refugee woman with an architectural university degree, describes how the employment agency worked off a roster of employers, all who offered subpar positions that did not align with her background. When issues of commuting intersected, she was not able to take any of these positions on, and instead is actively seeking for employment on her own.

> …All the work that they [employment agency] were offering, it was something that you can find by yourself… [For example] they found me a job, it's from 12 in the evening to 6 o'clock in the morning at [hardware store]. A job in a bakery at Mississauga, very far places. I'm not very demanding, believe me…but all the jobs they were very far. You need a car or I'm not interested [in these jobs]… if it was the retail at a mall, I would accept it. But, I don't know Mississauga or outside the GTA…

In addition to referrals to low-paying feminized positions that were not easily accessible, many of the women were recruited directly from settlement agencies by employers

seeking cheap labor. This sometimes resulted in false promises and wasted effort for the women while settlement agencies again benefit from partnerships with different employers in the area. Specifically, in collaborating with employers, these organizations are able to reach more newcomers, increasing their efficiency and thereby strengthening their applications for future funding. Alia, a teacher and librarian in Syria, describes how she felt hopeless when she was promised a job with an employer who had ties to her settlement counselor but, in the end, was cut from the short list of employees for having low language proficiency even though this was not fully disclosed at the beginning.

> At the end of the two weeks [of language training with employer], the employer said I'm sorry, I'm not going to take you. We are going to take only Level 5 and 6 English…I was shocked. At the beginning they said English is not a big matter as long as you have at least Level 2. And then I think they [employers] don't have credibility. So here I thought Canadian don't lie, but I think they did now. So we went to school every day from 11 until 3 o'clock for two weeks. So we were told by the end of this two weeks, you will sign a contract, but we didn't. This is affect on us a lot. Negatively (interpreter translated).

These employers are typically seeking as many newcomers a subsidy will cover to get the job done in a quick manner. By reaching out to settlement organizations, they have access to a pool of willing workers as well as counselors who are available to assist in the hiring process as described by Karina:

> I had a client who couldn't speak a word of English like very low, but then she took all her work samples like she had some clothes, some embroidery and stuff, and then she took it to the interview with (clothing manufacturer), and I was there to —they're having on-site interview, and then even she couldn't talk, speak English, but they accepted her and she's still working there…and then there are women with higher language skills and then other skills, computer skills and all those technical skills, but, they are referred to different places, depends on their skills and then some are more sufficient than others. And then they need a little bit of guidance compared to others.

Discussion

This study focused on the experiences of Syrian refugee women and settlement staff to explore the influence of settlement agencies on employability of refugees. Our findings provide rich insights on gendered dimensions of employment and programs and services offered through settlement agencies. The barriers associated with employment integration were particularly visible and highlighted the need to incorporate the women's competing demands when addressing their employment trajectories. These barriers included those commonly researched (e.g., language) but also issues such as childcare and lack of transportation that interfered with their job search.

In Canada and many similar jurisdictions, delivery of programs and services for newcomers is a shared responsibility between federal, provincial, and municipal

governments. While governments fund income supports as well as orientation and language training, the majority of all other services (e.g., employment, housing, health) are subcontracted to settlement agencies operating on short-term competitive program-based contracts (Shields et al. 2016). The effects of this precarious funding manifested in pronounced ways. Settlement staff described being understaffed and overworked which translated to inefficient service provision to newcomers (Lim et al. 2005) including limited employment advice and lack of follow-up activities. As a result, the women found themselves having to travel between organizations to seek the help they needed, often increasing their mobility burden (Premji 2017). Employment counselors suggested the use of transition assistants to be particularly helpful with alleviating workloads as well as acting as a cultural mediator between refugees and staff. In some EU countries including France and Italy, cultural mediators are a recognized profession as they require a specific skillset. This includes being able to deal with emotional stress and manage conflict, knowledge of both languages and cultural codes (that of the host country and country of origin), and the ability to work with vulnerable people (Forti 2016). These individuals are often migrants themselves and thus have related experiences which can resonate with refugees. In Canada, however, funding for additional personnel typically do not extend long term (Kenny and Mamuji 2019) and there is reliance on volunteers to carry out cultural mediation which can have challenges of its own (Behnia 2012).

Evaluation reports following the Syrian refugee initiative further indicated challenges to resettlement including inadequate training and experience of staff (Manitoba Association of Newcomer Serving Organizations (MANSO) 2016; Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA) 2016; Kenny and Mamuji 2019). In our study, the women described going through an intake process with settlement workers where employment was not usually a priority topic. This is another surprising finding given that newcomers who access settlement agencies tend to integrate more quickly into society than those who do not and that among the most vulnerable groups, the benefit is highest (Shields et al. 2016). The presumption here is that employment options are typically discussed when meeting a settlement counselor, yet the women in our study did not have the same experience.

In their study on the relationship between governments and immigrant-serving organizations, Meinhard et al. (2016) proposed sustained multiyear funding models as a way to improve service delivery. Particularly, multiyear funding versus short-term contracts can relieve pressure of annual contract renewal and provide agencies with the ability to engage in long-term planning and growth of services that meet the unique needs of refugees (Wayland 2006). In immigrant-receiving countries such as Germany and Australia, municipal governments have increasingly been playing a role in newcomer integration (Siemiatycki and Triadafilopoulos 2010). This devolved funding structure, where local governments are allotted a lump-sum of settlement funds with the assumption they are better placed to optimize delivery and outcomes, was once an efficient model in Canada as well (Alexander et al. 2012).

Adoption or reintroduction of similar models can help hire and adequately train staff and fund smaller, ethno-specific organizations. Ethno-specific organizations have emerged as instrumental in accessing vulnerable newcomer groups by catering to the sensitive needs of, and cultural backgrounds of, the local community (George 2002; Cullen 2009). In the case of our participants, many of our key informants were from

ethno-specific organizations, typically serving Arab newcomers that include Syrian refugees while the women were also accessing programs at these organizations (programs such as language training, child and family services, employment advice). The women described how engaging in programs with other Syrian women gave them a sense of belonging and shared community which helped fill the gap of separation from family and friends back home. This sense of belonging is a second advantage of these organizations that are trying to foster new networks for newcomers in a foreign country.

In the context of program applicability, however, our study captures how settlement agencies offered employment-based programs in feminized fields such as food preparation and child minding/rearing. Program managers characterized these as "social enterprise" programs meant to equip the women with soft skills such as language acquisition while allowing the women to earn some sort of income. While key informants found uptake in these social enterprise programs to be relatively high, viability of these skills in the Canadian labor market is low in comparison to other sectors. For instance, current job market trends indicate that vacancies are highest in sales and service as well as trades and transportation occupations (Statistics Canada 2018) but our current programming is not geared toward labor market needs. Skilled programs that were available were restricted to individuals that possessed high language levels and educational backgrounds such as economic immigrants. In response, the women described settlement agencies offering volunteer positions as a means to circumvent labor market shortcomings and gain Canadian work experience yet many felt overqualified. As well, there were times when volunteer work interfered with job search activities and unpaid work around the house such as caring for family members. This has been referred to as "double day" and lends to the growing scholarship around immigrant women's excessive workloads (Man 2004; Premji et al. 2014; Meraj 2015).

Further, this study provides a crucial example of how neoliberal restructuring has altered the settlement sector landscape. For settlement agencies, restructuring to a market-based funding model means that organizations need to think of clever tactics to promote their relevance and remain competitive. Settlement staff described collaborating with other organizations in the geographic area that offer complementary or different services to widen reach to newcomer groups (Cordero-Guzman et al. 2008). Key informants also sought out, or were approached by employers, to fill large vacancies of cheap labor. They generally spoke positively about their relationship with employers suggesting that it was a mutually beneficial partnership that provided a foothold in the labor market for willing newcomers. Similar to Kosny et al.'s (2019) study on employment integration of immigrants and refugees in Ontario, the jobs provided by employers were often low-paying and low-skilled. Power dynamics at the intersections of gender, immigrant status, and employment are particularly visible here as many of the women described their lack of knowledge about navigating the Canadian employment system. For many, the very concept of paid employment was different from how they practiced work in Syria. Starting a business, for instance, was relatively easy in Syria while in Canada, regulations, licensing, promotion, and capital hindered any prospects. So, the women were more receptive to taking on positions offered through settlement agencies even though it may come as a mismatch to their skills and qualifications.

Our study suggests interconnections between immigrant status, employment, and social structures in the context of settlement agencies in Canada. Our findings suggest that employability of refugees is not only shaped by individual factors as commonly cited but also through the quality of programs and services they access upon arrival. Accordingly, our findings highlight policy implications that should be considered to improve employment integration of refugees. First, there is a need for settlement organizations to mobilize and engage in capacity building to serve the multitude of refugee settlement needs. This would entail looking beyond two-way partnerships of organizations for the purpose of employment referrals but rather an integrated hub of services that fall under one large institution. Governments may be more inclined to fund such a consortium (Sidhu and Taylor 2009) and newcomers may benefit from a "one-stop shop" saving on time and transportation.

Our findings also highlight the need for specialized services for refugees and other vulnerable newcomers rather than homogenized programming that is inclusive of all immigrant categories. Given the rushed nature of their departure and lack of social ties, refugees face a difficult integration process that extends to employment. For example, refugees tend to take on more precarious, low-skilled positions as compared to other immigrants and when gender intersects, women fare worse, becoming either under or unemployed (Premji and Shakya 2017). Participants in our study, however, mentioned that programming available to them was not geared toward paid employment while those that were had various barriers that prevented them from enrolling. Thus, the design of programs needs to change to a more equitable approach that targets these barriers while providing access to decent employment. Refugee women consistently felt there was a lack of in-depth, one-on-one interactions between themselves and settlement workers resulting in minimal to no follow-up and passing off to other organizations. To address high workloads and tight deadlines that will likely increase as more and more refugees arrive, funding schemes need to consider a budget for additional personnel such as transition assistants as well as job developers as mentioned in our study. Additionally, with the rise of cross-organizational partnerships, agencies should consider instituting language training or the use of interpreters to facilitate employment program uptake, and in-house childcare, as well as providing transit fare or subsidizing transportation costs on employment program days.

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