

Research for communities

INNER CITY REFUGEE WOMEN: LESSONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Refugee women identify the policy changes that they need to help them realize their goals and dreams.

The challenges of adjusting to life in a new community can be stressful at the best of times. For many refugees, adapting to a new life in Canada is complicated by the deep trauma that arises from the horrendous experiences they experienced before arriving in Canada. Added to this trauma is the guilt that is felt when families left behind continue to suffer through war and famine. For female refugees, there is the additional challenge of creating a new life and raise a family in a new country.

In recent years Manitoba has accepted an increasing number of refugees from Africa. In 2001, 36% of Manitoba's refugees originated from Africa; however, each year after 2002, over 60% of new refugees came from Africa. Many of these refugees live in Winnipeg's inner city.

In 2006, the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association, an organization founded by refugee women, worked with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba to prepare a report that would voice the concerns and interests of refugee women.

Inner City Refugee Women - Lessons for Public Policy, by Shauna MacKinnon, Sara Stephens and Zeitun Salah, is based on 15 interviews with refugee women, most of whom came from Africa, and two focus groups with refugee women from countries around the world. It is part of the CCPA's annual State of the Inner City Report.

Refugee women arrive in Canada with

Amal Koshin, Mayran Kalah, Zeitun Salah and Asili Gelle of the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association at the Association's new home at Knox United Church in Central Park.



hopes and dreams, as well as the drive, initiative and desire to be accepted and integrated into Canadian society as active members. One participant said, "I never had a stable life, so one of my plans before I came to Canada was just to have a stable life. I had my own ambitions; one of them was to finish my education, which was quite

zigzag when I was moving around. So, when I came to Manitoba, I had my own plan; it was to finish my education, and get a job, and live a normal life.”

A ‘normal’ life, associated with freedom and stability, is not always attainable. One Somali woman said that although she is in Canada now and her children are in school, they are living in poverty. She said that she and her children have become a different kind of refugees in Canada; physically safe, but constrained by poverty and lack of opportunity they live partial and incomplete lives just as they did in Africa.

LANGUAGE CHALLENGES

The experience of coming to a country where many of them did not fluently speak either national language and where few people spoke their language was clearly stressful and isolating for many of the women. They all recognized that they needed to develop their English language abilities. However, they expressed frustration with the availability and nature of much English as Second Language training. Lack of childcare often made it difficult for women who had family responsibilities to attend classes. Women said that the classes did not improve their ability to read and write, nor were they able to do much more than gain rudimentary English language skills.

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

Many of the women felt economically trapped and helpless. They realize that they cannot improve their economic situation without training, but cannot afford the costs of further training or education. Social assistance barely provides them with

enough to survive. At the same time, most government policies work to force people on social assistance into taking immediate employment rather than furthering their education. One woman said her social assistance worker told her to give up her goal of learning more English, saying “*You don’t need English for cleaning*”.

GOVERNMENT ATTITUDES

A common theme in interviews was the treatment individuals received from social assistance caseworkers. One respondent said “They treat people as if they are stones... They need to open up, understand human problems. I applied for social assistance one time in my whole life, and the experience I had of it still never leaves me.” Another woman said that the welfare system treats everyone like criminals. She wished workers could understand that refugees come here with nothing and are just trying to get started in Canada and need help.

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SAFETY

The availability and location of subsidized housing is a major factor in refugee women’s safety. Many live in subsidized housing in the inner city. One Somali woman said that she is concerned because her two children regularly see people selling and using drugs in the apartment building. Many women were concerned about their own and their children’s safety and often would not go

outside, therefore becoming socially isolated.

GANGS

Mothers of school aged children said their children were being bullied by young gang members and they were afraid for them. One Somali woman's son was being harassed at school, and was followed home, where young people demanding money threatened him and his mother. Although the woman told the school, the school district and eventually the police, the problem continued. Manitoba Housing told her it would take at least four years to relocate her to an area outside the inner city for her son's safety.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR FAMILY MEMBERS IN HOME COUNTRIES

Refugees come to Canada in flight from dangerous situations. But they have also left behind family members who are often still at risk or are living in refugee camps. Because they feel a responsibility for those left behind, virtually all the women interviewed were supporting families back home. The pressure to send money home led many women to accept low-paying jobs, to the detriment of their

educational and career goals. One Somali woman would like to go to school to train for a job in health care, but if she stopped working and took training she would have to stop sending support to family members back home.

MEN'S AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Many women said that there were significant differences between the roles that women were expected to play in the

The lack of family networks and resources leads many refugees to join together to support one another and to fight for rights and opportunities. The Sudanese Cultural and Resource Centre in Winnipeg has recently purchased a community centre where it can provide programs that address issues raised in this report.

Beginning in the spring of 2006, members of the African community living in the Central Park neighbourhood held a market every Saturday during the summer. By providing a place for people to meet and sell their crafts and goods it helped create a greater sense of belonging and an opportunity for people to create their own economic development futures.

Somali women are also beginning to organize their own networks of support. They have recently formed the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association. At weekly meetings, the women cook together, practice their English, and participate in activities with their children. One of the founders of the group expressed "It means to me, hope. Because if we are coming together and talking about our issues and finding ways to have solutions, you know, it makes me feel that we are—we have hope, finally."

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countries that they came from and in Canada. In their countries of origin women were expected to handle all domestic labour, but had limited educational or employment opportunities. In Canada, they might find themselves expected to work or study, but their partners did not feel an obligation to do domestic work. Furthermore, there were different understandings about the roles that women were restricted to in the family.

POLICY LESSONS

The full report makes a number of policy recommendations intended to assist refugees in realizing their goals and dreams. They have valuable experience, insights, beliefs, values and customs to contribute, and it is essential to remove barriers and help refugees to overcome challenges to making those contributions.

BETTER COORDINATION OF PROGRAMS

a. Create a more holistic service delivery model

ESL PROGRAMS

- a. Improve access to ESL by reducing wait times for courses and providing free childcare
- b. Train and hire immigrant and refugee teachers who speak the same language as the students
- c. Evaluate ESL programs and include student evaluations
- d. Create course content that is participatory, engaging and goal-oriented.

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

- a. Encourage compassion, comprehension and understanding from social assistance workers
- b. Educate refugees about their rights and responsibilities

c. Change the current emphasis on 'work-first'.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

- a. Increase government support for community-based organizations providing essential services to refugees
- b. Provide counseling services geared specifically toward refugees to help them deal with emotional trauma
- c. Provide greater resources for outreach
- d. Support immigrant and refugee-led economic development

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY FROM ORGANIZATIONS

a. Increase education and awareness in organizations about refugee and immigrant issues

HOUSING

a. Increase the number of public housing units in safe and convenient areas of the city

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN IMMIGRATION POLICY

- a. Increase awareness of the family values and responsibilities of refugees
- b. Decrease wait times for sponsoring family members

EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

- a. Develop bursaries and scholarships for immigrants and refugees
- b. Educate refugees about employment rights and responsibilities
- c. Increase opportunities for immigrants and refugees to improve their employment skills
- d. Encourage a diverse and culturally sensitive workforce

