EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS FOR REFUGEES: BARRIERS ON THE PATHWAY TO A GOOD JOB AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GETTING THERE

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The humanitarian resettlement of refugees requires supporting their successful integration into their new country. Quality employment that is secure, well-paying, and commensurate with training is critical to integration and is recognized as vital to newcomers' health. Employment provides economic support, and strengthens language, cultural knowledge, and the sense of belonging of refugees. Language abilities, a lack of recognition of foreign credentials, and lower education levels can contribute to an increased likelihood of unemployment and underemployment for newcomers; these challenges can be elevated for refugees. As Canada commits to the resettlement of larger numbers of refugees it is imperative that opportunities for quality employment opportunities for.

The humanitarian resettlement of refugees means more than just removing people from harm's way; protecting refugees' rights and well-being requires supporting their successful integration into their new home. Integration refers to various levels of inclusion into society (Hynie, Korn and Tao 2016). At the most concrete level, it can be defined as ensuring equitable access to socially valued outcomes, such as safe and appropriate housing, education, and good health (Smith, 2008; Strang & Ager, 2010). More broadly, it includes being able to contribute and participate in the community and society as a full member through civic engagement activities like voting and volunteering, and establishing social connections with members of one's own and other social or ethnic groups. Finally, at the subjective level, it means achieving feelings of security and belonging (Omidvar and Richmond 2003; Phillimore and Goodson 2008; Steel et al 2011).

Employment plays a critical role in successful resettlement and integration. Finding high quality employment is difficult for newcomers to Canada, regardless of their migration pathway (Latif 2015; Nakhaie and Kazemipur 2013; Schellenberg and Maheux 2007). Relative to other Canadians, immigrants and refugees are less likely to find employment, more likely to end up in precarious employment (i.e., temporary or part-time work), and less likely to find work that matches their skills and training. This is particularly true for visible minority newcomers, who are more likely to fill low-income jobs (Teelucksingh and Galabuzi 2005), are less represented in the high-income sector, and are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed (Galabuzi 2001, 2005; Nakhaie and Kazemipur 2013; Ng *et al.* 2005). These barriers may be greater for refugees, who are more likely to be unemployed or overqualified for the work that they do have, relative to other newcomers (Chen, Smith and Mustard 2010; Xue 2006).

REFUGEES AND EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

Several factors that are known to affect employment may affect refugees to a greater extent. Relative to immigrants, refugees are less likely to speak English or French on arrival to Canada, which is a significant barrier to finding employment (Grenier and Xue 2011; Grondin 2007; Schellenberg and Maheux 2007; Yssaad 2013). Prior education, training and other qualifications may not be recognized (Oreopoulos 2011). Moreover, the training that they do have may not be appropriate for the Canadian context (Grenier and Xue 2011). But refugees face additional hurdles; documentation from their country of origin that demonstrates their qualifications may not be available or accessible (Hynie 2014). Refugees can also face greater acculturation challenges. For the approximately 40% of refugees who migrate to Canada from rural regions or refugee camps (UNHCR 2012), adjusting to the new social and physical environment requires a great deal of adaptation (Hynie *et al.* 2016).

Education levels among refugees are also highly variable. Education levels can be much lower than what is seen among immigrants although comparable with the general Canadian population. According to the 2006 Canadian Census, 60% of recent immigrants had an undergraduate degree, compared to 20% of Canadian born of similar age, and 10% to 20% of adult refugees (Korn and Hynie 2015; Rietz, Curtis and Elrick 2014; Statistics Canada 2008). The nature of forced migration means that refugee youth often experience frequent and/or prolonged disruption of education, and education opportunities in refugee camps can be limited and/or difficult to access. Refugee youth can therefore have low levels of education for their age, and relative to non-refugee immigrants (Shakya *et al.* 2010). Between 20% to 25% of Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) who enter Canada may have no formal education (Korn and Hynie 2015). The latter newcomers are faced with learning a new language and adapting to a new social environment without the benefit of literacy in their first language.

A good job that is full-time with a reasonable wage in the area of one's training or expertise, with opportunities for advancement (Benach *et al.* 2014) is especially difficult to obtain for refugees for the reasons described above. There are also some surprising challenges that emerge due to the financial support resettled refugees receive in their first year. One unique source of support that resettled GARs have access to is immediate and essential services, which includes temporary housing, as well as income support for up to one year. Refugees are provided financial support under the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), which is intended to provide GARs time to acquire English/French language skills, and meet their other immediate settlement needs. For Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs), who represent the other large group of resettled refugees, financial and settlement support comes from sponsoring groups who are either charitable organizations or groups of private citizens. A third pathway of support referred to as the Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugee (BVOR) combines private and government sponsorship. BVOR refugees only comprise about 10% of resettled refugees.

Refugees themselves and those in the settlement sector working with them report that the financial support received in the first year is often not enough to meet basic needs (Hynie 2014), but GARs who do find work in the first year and earn more than 50% of what is received through RAP will encounter cuts in financial support. As a result, some refugees resort to the informal employment sector, exposing themselves to exploitation and hazardous working conditions (Hynie 2014). Following the first year, economic hardship often forces refugees to choose between employment and education, particularly youth who learn English/French more quickly than their parents and thus are more easily employed. For these youth, for whom education is often highly valued, the need to contribute and support their family can result in repeated withdrawal from the education system (Shakya *et al.* 2010). The consequences are lower long-term income and less professional development. This is not only a loss for the youth and their families, but also for Canada as whole, as we lose the opportunity to benefit from their energy, talent and aspirations.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND POOR QUALITY EMPLOYMENT

The ability to find productive work is recognized as a key element of mental health and well-being by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014). Not surprisingly, unemployment is associated with poverty and an inability to pay for one's basic needs (Kaida 2015; Picot and Hou 2003). There is also substantial evidence that unemployment among immigrants

and refugees is associated with a range of other negative social, physical and mental health outcomes (Reitmanova and Gustafson 2008). Unemployment has generally been associated with elevated levels of depression, stress and anxiety, and increasing family problems including marital conflict and a range of negative outcomes for their children, including antisocial behavior and poor performance in school (Campbell 2012; Corvalan, Driscoll and Harrison 1994).

It is not just employment that matters, however, but also the quality of the employment. There are a number of negative outcomes associated with poor quality employment (Benach *et al.* 2014). Research finds negative health outcomes associated with poor quality employment where it involves more physically demanding work. This includes high rates of injuries and chronic health conditions. Those working in precarious jobs are unable or afraid to seek medical help, to request changes in their work environment to prevent injury, or to take a medical leave when required. Those working in physically demanding jobs for which they do not have formal training are also more likely to sustain injury through a lack of knowledge of health and safety measures (Chen, Smith and Mustard 2010; Smith and Mustard 2009; Wilson *et al.* 2011).

Working in a job that is not commensurate with training and education also has psychological consequences. Longitudinal research with a large sample of refugees in the UK found that over-qualification for employment was associated with decreased mental health over time (Campbell 2012). The negative mental health effects associated with being overqualified occur in part through newcomers' dissatisfaction with their work (Smith and Mustard 2009). This suggests that newcomers with the highest expectations may face the greatest disappointments and may partially explain the finding that mental health outcomes are worse for refugees with the highest pre-migration education and socio-economic class (Porter and Haslam 2005).

BELONGING AND EMPLOYMENT

While a lack of employment and a lack of high quality employment clearly has negative effects on refugee well-being, participation in employment is an important pathway to integration. Employment plays a role in several different aspects of integration including building friendships with Canadians outside of one's co-ethnic group, strengthened language skills and cultural knowledge, and improved economic circumstances (Beiser and Wickrama 2004; Gupta and Sullivan 2013; Regitmanova and Gustafson 2008; Wilson-Forsberg 2015). Employment may also play a critical role in developing a sense of belonging to Canada.

As part of an impact evaluation of Client Support Services for GARs in Ontario who had arrived within the past six years, we asked focus group participants the question "what makes you feel like you are at home?" (Korn and Hynie 2015). As one participant put it: "First, of course, the job." Indeed, for men, this was a universal first response to this question. For women, the presence of family members was equally important, and employment was more likely to be framed in terms of meeting personal goals and material needs. The men also spoke of material needs and poverty, but they also clearly linked employment with their ability to participate in and contribute to society. In the words of one member of a focus group:

> "When you pay the tax you become more relax. Yeah. You feel you are man to give to your town. Not just give me, give me, give me. No. You give back to community."

Likewise, in the words of another focus group member:

> "Because you know, when you have job and… give to Canada, you feel this is your home."

CONCLUSIONS

Employment supports multiple aspects of the integration process. However, the nature of the employment matters; good quality jobs are critical. As we commit to the resettlement of larger numbers of refugees in Canada, we must revisit how we are supporting their ambition to be full contributing members of Canadian society, and reflect on how we can best foster a context where refugees, and all newcomers, can find satisfying and meaningful employment, to the benefit of us all.

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