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# **Inner-City Refugee Women: Stories of Hope and Survival, Lessons for Public Policy**

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with Zeitun Salah**

**The Canadian Centre for Policy  
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# Inner-City Refugee Women:

## Stories of Hope and Survival, Lessons for Public Policy

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### Executive Summary

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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 survived 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 raising 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 some of the concerns and interests of refugee women.

Through 15 interviews and 2 focus groups, we worked with refugee women to gather stories that reflect the ongoing challenges that many refugee women face as they adjust to life in Winnipeg's inner city. This report begins by describing the complicated context within which settlement issues continue for the women we interviewed. It ends with a series of policy and program recommendations that could be implemented to improve the way that governments respond to the needs of refugees.

# Inner-City Refugee Women:

## Stories of Hope and Survival, Lessons for Public Policy

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### 1. Introduction

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The research reflected in this paper is part of a broader community-based project that aims to capture the ever-evolving story of Winnipeg's inner city. The project, known as "State of the Inner City Report," is coordinated by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba (CCPA-MB). The project began in 2005 and resulted in a two-part report titled *The Promise of Investment in Community Led Renewal: State of the Inner City 2005*.

The success of the 2005 project led to an ongoing collaboration that aims to release an annual report to celebrate the important work being done in the inner city, to raise awareness of the ongoing challenges, and to offer policy recommendations generated by community-based research. The project continues to be guided by a steering committee consisting of representatives of several community-based inner-city organizations.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the broader community with a window into the lives of refugee women so that we might better understand their hopes, dreams, and frustrations as they settle into life in Winnipeg's inner-city neighbourhoods.

This paper is the result of a collaboration initiated by women from the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association. Consistent with the Participatory Action Framework (PAR) used, the women were involved in all aspects of the research, in-

cluding research design, implementation, analysis, and the development of this final report, which captures the voices, concerns, and interests of refugee women who participated in the research. As well, the policy recommendations, which identify solutions to the problems refugee women face in their everyday lives in Winnipeg, were developed through collaboration with refugee women.

In addition to this report and the condensed version within the *Inner-City Voices, Community-Based Solutions: State of the Inner City Report 2006*, a four-page summary is available.<sup>1</sup> The summary report is also available in Arabic and Somali.

### Defining Immigration Categories

The women interviewed for this project came to Canada as refugees. Under Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, individuals apply to come to Canada as either 'Temporary' or 'Permanent' residents. Temporary residents may come as workers, students, or visitors. Those seeking permanent resident status apply through one of three channels: Family Class, Economic Class, or Refugee Class.

Family Class immigrants are sponsored by family members already established in Canada. Economic Class immigrants include those who are accepted based on bringing specific skills and/or capital to invest. Refugees are those individuals

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1. In November 2006, CCPA-MB released *Inner-City Voices, Community-Based Solutions: State of the Inner-City Report 2006*. A condensed version of *Inner-City Refugee Women: Stories of Hope and Survival, Lessons for Public Policy* is included in that report.

who are accepted because they are considered to require protection under international law. They can be government or privately sponsored. (See <[www.gov.mb.ca/labour/immigrate/portal](http://www.gov.mb.ca/labour/immigrate/portal)>).

While there are issues of adjustment for all new Canadians, the study described in this paper was focused on the settlement experiences of refugee women living in Winnipeg's inner city.

### **Manitoba Immigration Trends and the Changing Face of Refugees**

Manitoba is home to an increasing number of new immigrants in all classes. This is, in part, due to the 2002 provincial policy goal to bring 10,000 new immigrants to Manitoba each year.

There has also been a new trend in terms of the home of origin of immigrants, but in particular of refugees. This is largely due to changes at the federal level. In 2002, the Government of Canada implemented a new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*. Several changes were introduced, including a policy to place greater emphasis on refugees' *need for protection* and less on the *ability to resettle*. This change was welcomed by advocates of refugees who have long lobbied for refugees in dire need. However, these changes also resulted in new challenges that require an immediate policy response.

The new focus on need rather than ability has resulted in a refugee population that arrives with much deeper and more complex problems, requiring supports and services beyond what is currently available. There is an overwhelming pressure on existing infrastructure and services. Refugees have a very difficult time finding adequate and affordable housing, and the important services they rely on—settlement services, English language training, job training, income support, childcare—are stretched to the limit. Agencies that work with refugees are underfunded and understaffed, and are simply unable to keep up with demand. Schools are not prepared for children who have lost years of education after having lived in refugee camps. Families are forced to set aside dealing with the trauma resulting from the atrocities of war and violence as they struggle for basic survival among people who do not understand them and all too often are resentful of their presence.

Some government officials claim to be aware that major changes are required and that they are working to develop more appropriate policy and program responses. However, the women whom we interviewed felt that governments—federal and provincial—are not responding quickly enough. And it is not only government agencies that need to adapt. Refugee women also spoke to the need for community-based services to better respond to the changing needs of refugees.

**Table 1: Manitoba Refugees 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005**

% refugees from African countries in top 10	44%	53%	76%	84%	80%
African country of origin in top 10	425	431	818	809	685
Other countries in top 10	529	380	245	147	168
Total Manitoba Refugees	1160	979	1235	1252	1094
African % of total refugees	36%	38	66	64	62

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, December 2005  
Prepared by Manitoba Labour and Immigration, June 2006

## **Manitoba's Refugee Population**

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Manitoba has become home for 1094 refugees in 2005 and 6744 since 2000 (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, June 2006).

Almost half (3117) of the total number of refugees who have come to Manitoba since 2000 are from African countries. In 2001, 36% of Manitoba's refugees originated from Africa; however, each year after 2002, over 60% of new refugees came from Africa (Table 1). Other countries in the top ten include Afghanistan and Colombia.

In 2005, the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council Inc. (MIIC) provided services for 421 new refugee 'cases' with a total number of 872 individuals. Of the top ten countries of origin of new cases, eight are

African. MIIC welcomed a total of 493 African refugees to Manitoba in 2005 (MIIC Annual Report, 2005).

While we were unable to find data about the exact number of refugees settling in the inner city, an MIIC settlement worker told us the number is significant. This is especially so for African refugees. In fact, it is uncommon for African refugees to find their first homes outside the inner city (H. Al-Ubeady, personal communication, August 9, 2006). There are a variety of reasons that refugees 'choose' the inner city as home. Centrality of location, access to services, and being close to others from their homeland are often cited by refugees as their reason for living in the inner city. But many refugees stay in the inner city simply because that is where housing is affordable and available, although not always adequate in size or condition.

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## 2. Focus on the Settlement Challenges of African Refugees

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The inner-city African community has become a focus of attention in recent years. The interest is, in part, due to the increasing number of young African men who have been drawn into gang activity, resulting in media attention, negative stereotypes, and additional stress for families.

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 had before arriving in Canada. Added to this trauma is the guilt they feel when families left behind continue to suffer through war and famine. Feelings of relief from having escaped, combined with the guilt and despair for having left loved ones behind, continue to haunt refugees long after they arrive.

Many refugees arrive in Canada with limited or no ability to speak English. As well, cultural and religious differences pose significant adjustment challenges. While the poverty many refugees experience in Canada does not compare to that experienced in their homelands, they continue to struggle for survival while surrounded

by prosperity. They come with high expectations and they are not prepared for the challenges with which they are presented.

Female refugees and their children are particularly vulnerable as they struggle to adapt to their new homes. For women, the primary caregivers of their children, the pressure to learn a new language, find work, and care for their children in a society with very different rules presents challenges for which they were not prepared.

Refugees most often cite finding work as the most difficult challenge (Wayland, 2006, p. 6). For refugees with specific skills and education, credentials from their homeland are often not recognized, making it impossible for them to gain employment in their field of expertise. As a result, they are often left with little choice but to accept low-wage work that does not utilize their skills. Other refugees have spent years in refugee camps before coming to Canada and have had very little access to formal education of any kind. For them, the process of settlement can be overwhelming, and their lack of basic education poses seemingly insurmountable challenges.



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### **3. Inner City African Women Begin to Speak Out**

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Frustrated with the barriers that keep them from moving forward, refugee women are beginning, albeit slowly, to speak out. But they often do so with great hesitation. While they are extremely grateful to be in Canada, many are frustrated that they cannot seem to move beyond a level of basic survival. They come with hopes and dreams for better lives for their families but often are unable to escape poverty. But they hesitate to complain for fear of reprisal and so they often suffer in silence, giving up on the dreams they had for themselves and hoping life will be better for their children.

In 2005, a small group of women from Somalia decided to work together to find their own solutions to the challenges common to them all. Their group, the Somali

Canadian Family and Youth Association, meet regularly at Knox United Church in Winnipeg's Central Park neighbourhood. Here they share information, improve their English language skills, discuss their ongoing challenges, and support each other through the process of adjusting to life in Winnipeg.

One of the issues they identified is the lack of awareness and understanding about the many challenges they face as refugees and women living in poverty, and the difficulty they have navigating through the various policies and programs they regularly encounter. Their difficulties and their desire to be heard inspired them to tell their stories—to identify the various issues as they see them—and to present their ideas of how problems might be solved.

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## 4. Methodology

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Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba worked with members of the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association to develop a culturally sensitive interview instrument to be used to gather and share the stories of inner-city refugee women. A woman from the Somali community was hired to conduct 15 interviews with Somali women and to conduct—with the primary researcher—two focus groups.

Twenty women participated in the focus groups. One focus group consisted of women who also participated in the interviews. A second focus group consisted of women who had not previously been interviewed. The initial plan to interview only Somali women was altered to include refugee women from other countries. This change was made because of the sudden reluctance of women who were initially agreeable to being interviewed. Some of the women cited their reason for withdrawing as that “their husbands did not want them to be interviewed.”<sup>2</sup> We decided at that point to broaden the range

of refugee women interviewed, and then included interviews with women from Sudan and Afghanistan, countries also represented in the Manitoba’s top ten countries of origin of refugees.

The range of refugee experiences was further broadened since one of the two focus groups included refugee women from Vietnam, Brazil, Afghanistan, Colombia, and Ethiopia.<sup>3</sup> The 15 women who participated in this focus group varied in their cultural backgrounds, the number of years they had lived in Canada, and their age groups. However, they all shared the experience of being refugees and adjusting to life in Canada, and many of their struggles and concerns were the same.

We also interviewed service providers, such as settlement workers, and government officials in Employment and Income Assistance, in order to better understand the challenges the women spoke of with regard to Canadian systems and services.

Research ethics approval was granted through the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence.

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2. We recognize that this dynamic calls for deeper analysis. However, to engage in this analysis would take us beyond the parameters of this project.

3. These women were referred to us by the Nor’West Co-op Community Health Centre and Immigrant Women’s Counseling Services.

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## 5. Refugee Women's Voices

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The women interviewed shared their stories about their motivations to come to Canada, their often harrowing journeys here from their home countries, and their experiences after arriving in Canada. Their stories are important because they provide us with a better understanding of the complicated context of their settlement process.

Refugee experiences are as unique as the individuals themselves. However, to provide some context to the pages that follow, we share a very small piece of one Somali woman's painful story of her physical and emotional journey to Canada. In respect for her privacy, we do not reveal her actual name.

Hawa bravely told us in detail of her narrow escape from death during the war in Somalia. Her journey from Somalia to Canada is horrific and difficult for most Canadians to fully grasp. And yet, her experience is not an uncommon one among refugees.

When political unrest in Somalia grew in 1993, Hawa was a teenager. There had been internal battles going on for many months, so at first when militant groups began fighting in her city and she and her family fled, they expected that fighting would subside and they would be able to return home within a few days. However, war broke out, and she and her family would never return to their home.

*We thought 'Okay, this is another one; we'll just go for the day and come back.' ... We never really see this as this is the last time you're going to see your home. So I had like a big sheet ... I cover myself, and I was wearing a dress, and the only thing I*

*took was ... a small book.... [W]e stayed there for like—we thought we're going to stay there one day, until two days, three days, becomes seven days—people started starving. Like you've got to eat, you've got to go back to city, it's constantly firing. So it came to the point where they had to start fighting where we were.... So it came to the day when we had to flee to the city.*

She describes the chaos and fear that mark their attempt to return to the city:

*I remember everybody just running from everywhere, I was on top of a truck, I don't even know how I ended up on top of a truck, or who's truck was it, whatever it was. With million of people, kids, adults, men, women, people you don't know, it was just crowded like this. And I was with my mom. None of my other family was there, everybody [fled] wherever, right? So we're trying to flee the city, you have to understand everybody's trying to get out with their cars at the same time.... It's jammed. Nothing.... So the enemies are blowing the vehicles with the people on it, in the road, in the traffic, with their missiles. So you're afraid ... the fear of dying and heat of the sun. Like seven days we didn't even eat probably, basically. People are vomiting on me, like the heat, the sun is killing me, there's people stepping on me, I'm stepping on people, it's like—I've never seen anxiety like that in my life; I cannot explain how it was. I almost had like heart attack.... I could not breathe. I don't know how to explain, but I realize that before I get blown up, I'm going to die in this truck. Just the conditions in the truck, right? I looked at it and I said to my mom 'Listen, I can't be here, I need to get out.' I wanted to get out.*

She and her mother got out of the truck and began to walk. They were fortunate enough to speak a local dialect and pretended to be from the rebel tribes. They moved through this tribe's territory on foot, in continual fear of being discovered and killed, or starving to death.

*... so we travelled with them three months, we slept during the day, I can't even tell you was it three months, was it six months ... I just thought it was three months, but it was maybe more than that, I don't know.... So we sleep all day, you stay, rest all day, and then we started walking at night.*

They walked twelve hours a night, and for so many days that their clothes were destroyed and they had to make garments from the blanket the woman brought with her and from leaves from trees.

*I eventually came to a city where it was my people and my tribe ... [they're still fighting with the enemy], there's still a fight going on, you see the corpses on the road, it's just the enemy [so] they don't even bury them, and it's like—and constant attacks from the enemy ... when we rested, I spoke to my mom, I said, 'I'm leaving and I'm going to go somewhere where I feel safe.' Because the women were being raped—there were 16 people that was traveling with us, that the moment we left, they slaughtered them, with axes and stuff like that, because we were the same people, related, we know them. The girls that I know they're raped, and men they just cut their heads off, and I was—I should have been one of those people, except the dialect saved me and my mom.*

Hawa began to walk to Kenya with a group of people who were going there as traders. She eventually ended up in Nairobi, where she met a Somali man who

was twice her age. She did not love him, but married him when she became pregnant with his child. He was an American citizen and wanted their child to be born in America. Once in America, Hawa applied to come to Canada with hope of finding greater opportunities. However, her arrival in Canada did not mean that her problems and struggles were over:

*So, that was my only chance of coming to Canada, and I was very grateful at the time. But it ended up to become more like he bought me. When I realized I had no relatives and I didn't have anybody else after me, there's no other people who's caring about me. He realized my history and my situation, he became possessive. And he thought, 'Nobody's concerned even if you kill her.' Right? So that was where the problem started. And I had to stand up for me, to defend myself and you know, survive.*

However, her arrival in Canada did not mean her problems and struggles were over. After being raped by her husband's friends and suffering extreme physical abuse by her husband (nearly killing her while her children watched) Hawa eventually gained the strength to leave her husband and move to a new city. Her journey continues in Winnipeg as she fights to pursue her dreams for a better life for herself and her children.

Hawa's story is heart-wrenching, her spirit is an inspiration to women everywhere. But what is perhaps most tragic is the fact that her story is not uncommon among refugees. The experiences of women like Hawa are critical for us to hear so that we can better understand the long emotional and physical journey that many refugees experience. We provide only a snapshot of Hawa's journey as context for the pages that follow and to encourage greater un-

derstanding for the need for policy and programs that better reflect the complex needs of the women and their families who have survived the unimaginable before reaching their adopted Canadian homes.

### **Coming to Canada: Hopes, Dreams, and Realities**

The refugee women interviewed all had expectations about the kind of lives and opportunities they would experience when they arrived in Canada. Virtually all the women we spoke to expected they would have access to education and training and that they would get 'good jobs'. "[When I arrived] I have two things I want to do.... I want to go to university and I'd like to [have] a business."

That was five years ago and this Somali woman still feels no closer to this goal. She identifies the most significant barriers being language and her lack of education.

Another Somali woman who has been in Canada for 12 years described her expectations:

*I was thinking when I come, when I get there I will study or you know, get a job, my expectations were very high. You know? So, that's what I was thinking. That I was going to do something with my life. Like I was going to be somebody ... I wanted to have a career. With that, you have to get the education first ... I am still in that.... Trying to achieve.*

These expectations were mirrored by almost all respondents. Dreams for obtaining education and jobs were associated with a feeling of stability that many refugees did not have in their home countries.

One Somali respondent elaborated:

*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 for these women. Although all the women interviewed expressed a desire to become educated, work, and enjoy a safe and happy life in Canada, few felt they had achieved those goals, due to the challenges and barriers they faced as refugees in a new and unfamiliar country. One Somali woman, whose hope was to become an active member of Canadian society and also contribute to the lives of her family who were back in Africa, 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 refugee in Canada: they are physically safe, but are constrained by poverty and lack of opportunity and live just as partial and incomplete lives as they did in Africa.

### **Challenges and Barriers**

It is clear from these stories that refugee women arrived in Canada with hopes and dreams, as well as the drive, initiative, and desire to be accepted and integrated into Canadian society as active members. However, for many of these women, acceptance, support, and encouragement were lacking. Their status as newcomers to the country, with what one woman from Afghanistan described as "no history" in Canada, often having no family, supports, or resources in Canada, means that refugees face significant challenges in their attempt to rebuild their lives in a new country. These challenges and barriers must be explored to



understand the situations of many refugees in Canada, and what can be done to help refugee women to live up to their potential and fulfill their goals.

As one refugee service provider noted: “Refugees experience the same barriers that other poor people experience. On top of that they experience the challenges of adjusting to a new culture, racism, language barriers and so on.” We explored these barriers as they emerged in conversations with refugee women.

#### **a. Language Challenges—English as a Second Language (ESL)<sup>4</sup>**

The women who participated in the study had different levels of English speaking and writing skills before they came to Canada. Some could not speak any English, others could speak some English but could not read or write it, and some had participated in English classes before coming to Canada. 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.

One Somali woman said that her experiences in Somalia during the war made it difficult for her to focus on learning English. She said that “a mind that has experienced war and its struggles and hardships cannot learn anything or concentrate on anything.”

Many other women spoke of their frustration at not being able to express themselves to English speakers. One Sudanese woman explained the impacts of this situation:

*I'm not happy because here, I don't know*

*how to speak English, and I know how to speak my mother tongue. So I can't speak my mother tongue and just here in Canada ... I need to speak with the people nicely, I can't. So when I can't speak or ... there is something I can't understand it, I feel bad. Yeah. I feel bad.*

Some women who had completed ESL and had been speaking English for years still felt that English presented a barrier to them:

*I came here, my first language is not English. That has—despite the fact that I have learned it, I can read, I can get good marks, I can pass and all that—I still have to probably spend more time to understand things, because even though I have lived here for eight years, that doesn't make me a first language speaker, right? You can still communicate, but that is one major challenge still.*

Many women with school-aged children found that their children learned more English than they did, and this created a generational language barrier. One Sudanese woman struggled with this increasing language barrier between herself and her children. She regretted that she was unable to help her children with their homework because they knew more English than she did. Other women were concerned that their children would forget their mother languages and adopt solely English.

One of the most common and pressing barriers formed by the English language emerged in conversations about education and training. Many women felt that their poor English skills limited their opportunities to access education and training programs.

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4. The term English as Second Language (ESL) is now more commonly referred to as English as an Additional Language (EAL). All of the women we interviewed used the term ESL therefore we have maintained this language for the purpose of this report.

### ***b. ESL Training***

As one respondent told us, language is power, and, for the most part, Winnipeg is an English-speaking city. In order for her to become a part of Canadian society, English was absolutely essential. This was the case for most of the respondents. Additional training in English was a common goal for them when they arrived in Canada, and they enrolled in ESL programs. However, ESL programs often do not address the women's other needs and responsibilities in order to make it easier for them to learn.

Many of the women faced practical barriers to attending ESL courses due to their roles as sole or primary caregivers for young children. With no childcare offered by the ESL programs, many women were unable to attend classes or had to bring their children with them, which affected their ability to focus and concentrate. One Sudanese woman said she found it difficult to go to school because when her child was ill, she would have to stay home and miss classes. Another woman said it was too hard for her to try to do her own schooling and look after her children at the same time. One Sudanese woman also found that places in the ESL class were not guaranteed. She had missed classes to watch her children and she said that her place in class had been filled when she was ready to return.

Many women also expressed dissatisfaction with the content of ESL classes. One Sudanese woman noted that although ESL courses teach participants to listen to and speak English words, they do not teach them how to read and write. This strategy made learning very difficult for her. Many women have never learned to write in their own mother languages, and this makes writing in English even more difficult. A woman from Colombia said

she also found the content of ESL courses disappointing because they mostly listened to the teacher speak and had no opportunity to speak themselves. This made her hesitant to speak English because she had no practice in a supportive learning environment.

The teaching style used in many ESL classes was another major concern. One Somali respondent noted that most ESL teachers speak only English. The students cannot understand the teacher, and the teacher does not speak the same language as the students and is unable to fully assist them in their learning. In other cases, classes are conducted by a teacher who shares a mother tongue with some students, and not others. This can make things even more confusing. For example, one Somali woman talked about being put in an ESL class where the teacher and all the other students were Chinese. The teacher explained words and wrote in Chinese, which made the course even more difficult for the Somali student.

Another Somali woman said that this language barrier means that women cannot complete their homework, and therefore get further and further behind. She had met women who, when they finally approached someone for help with their homework, had a bag full of old assignments and had to choose which ones they would finally attempt to work through.

### ***c. Education, Training, and Social Assistance***

Access to education and training to get jobs was a key issue for virtually all respondents. Women particularly noted the costs that they cannot afford, long waiting lists, and the limited choices that social assistance allows them.

*What is stopping me? ... I'm not being*

*provided with the opportunities that fit my needs.... [F]irst, I'm a refugee, that's first. That itself is keeping me. And by that I mean—I can't get a job. I can't get a job that will pay me enough to be able to pay for my daycare, and live, and you know? ... I can't pay for anything.... The hardship is the welfare. That's the barrier. Because I'm on welfare and I can't, I can't study. I'm on welfare. I have to just do what I'm told and just go look for a job. Which I can't because, what am I looking [for]? What kind of job? ... I don't qualify for anything.*

We were most confused by the stories that women told us about their difficulties accessing financial support from Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) so they can further their education to qualify for jobs that pay a living wage. They told us that EIA would not cover their costs for tuition and books. Living allowances are provided for short-term training only. They told us that they were not encouraged to pursue education and training but rather to get jobs—any jobs. But the reality for these women is that without education or training, the jobs available to them are limited to those paying low wages and often requiring them to work hours not conducive to their lives as parents—often sole parents. For others, finding work without further ESL or other training is impossible.

One woman said she had no opportunities due to living in poverty on social assistance. She is able to pay her rent with what she receives, but cannot pay her utilities and often has to approach her neighbours for food. She expressed her frustration and hopelessness that the opportunities for education and employment that she hoped for when coming to Canada will never be realized. She would also like to get more education to be able to find a well-

paying job and get off social assistance, but EIA will not cover the costs of her education. She feels trapped and hopeless.

Unfortunately, this woman's story is by no means uncommon. The women repeatedly told us of the pressure they received from social assistance workers to find jobs, regardless of wages, work hours, and conditions of work. This creates a great deal of stress in many women's lives. For many women with childcare and other social responsibilities, working full-time is neither possible nor financially beneficial. As one woman said, it will not benefit her to work full-time because she will then have to pay for childcare. However, she receives no support from social assistance to attempt to work part-time and attend school part-time while also caring for her children. When she wanted to move on to higher education to get a well-paying job, her EIA worker told her that she would not be covered to go to classes.

Another woman described her difficulty with attempting to study for a health care program while caring for her two children. She has been accepted to a program, but she has to pay \$4500 and welfare will not cover her school fees. She wants to take the course to enable her to get off social assistance, but she has no one to help her pay. A woman from Colombia who was in a similar situation was also being pressured to get a job before improving her English skills and going to school. She told us that she stood up for herself and her son's future and the worker then changed her mind. She is now allowed to pursue school for two years. She stressed that welfare workers need to understand that people rely on social assistance for different reasons, and they should not all be dealt with as if their situations were the same. She felt that refugees' special challenges and concerns were not taken into account.



Refugee women often reported that they felt forced by social assistance to accept jobs that are poorly paying and low-skilled, in which they will have little or no chance to save enough money for education or obtain skills to pursue better jobs. A Colombian woman told us that her social assistance worker told her to give up her goal of learning more English, saying, “*You don’t need English for cleaning.*”

We met with government officials from Employment and Income Assistance in an effort to better understand why the women we interviewed were having such a difficult time receiving support. We were told that while EIA will provide assistance for clients to participate in training, the policy of EIA is “work first.” Clients are assessed to determine their level and suitability for work and they are expected to work if they are able. At the discretion of the worker, clients may be provided with basic living allowances while attending training; however, the norm is short-term training.<sup>5</sup>

EIA staff advised us that they “*are not in the business of supporting people to get careers.... [I]f they want to go to university, they can do so just like anyone else.... [T]hey can get student loans...we are here to transition people to work as quickly as possible.... [O]ur policy is ‘work first’.*”

A few of the women we interviewed told

us they had qualified for University Access programs<sup>6</sup> but were told by EIA that they were not eligible for living allowances to participate because the programs were beyond the maximum two-year period allowed. When asked about government policy to support EIA clients qualifying for Access programs, we were advised that the current policy is that decisions are made at the discretion of caseworkers. But we were again reminded that the policy of EIA is “work first.” We were also surprised, given the NDP government’s past support for Access programs, when told that policy to provide living allowances to EIA clients qualifying for Access programs at the discretion of workers is under review. We were told that because university Access programs are longer than EIA’s two-year limit, the Province is looking at eliminating this option entirely for EIA recipients. Again we were told: “*We are not here to support people to get careers, if they want to go to university, they can do so, but just like everyone else.*”

#### ***d. Government Attitudes – Systemic Barriers***

A common theme in interviews was the treatment individuals received from social assistance caseworkers. One respondent articulated the impacts of this treatment, which was a common experience among refugees.

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5. EIA policy is dependent on the category of the client. For example, clients with children under six may be supported through up to two years of training. Others may be supported through training that is much shorter in duration. But the policy appears to be arbitrary and at the discretion of the worker.

6. See the Manitoba government Web site <[www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aet/unicoll/access.html](http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/aet/unicoll/access.html)> for a description of Manitoba Access programs. These programs are targeted toward Aboriginal people and others with barriers to education. When introduced in the 1980s, clients on social assistance who were accepted into the programs were provided with living allowances for the duration of the program. This was phased out in the 1990s under the Filmon government. While the current NDP government has expanded funding for Access programs, they have not reinstated policy to provide living allowances, although exceptions are made at the discretion of EIA caseworkers.

*One thing I find very difficult is the way social workers and the social offices handle people, which is very inhumane, very, very inhumane.... They treat people as if they are stones.... They need to open up, understand human problems.... People go to Social Assistance in order to—as a last resort, in order to keep what they have . [Social assistance workers] should encourage this person to find a job in a very appropriate manner. Without hurting his pride. I applied [for] social assistance one time in my whole life, and the experience I had of it still never leaves me. It was so shameful.*

One Somali woman said she feels that people on welfare are not supported or encouraged. The workers treat people with disrespect, and there is no trust, even when people are doing everything they can to better their lives and situations. Another Somali 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. She said welfare workers often act as if they are paying people out of their own pockets.

Another Somali woman talked about her experience as a volunteer interpreter for other Somali women who cannot speak English and cannot understand their social assistance workers. She told us that she has seen many women treated with disrespect, even when misunderstandings arise because of language barriers. She reported that in one incident, a social assistance worker “yelled” at a Somali woman and walked away from her, refusing to talk to her until she had completed an administrative form she required. The interpreter was astonished and did not know how to translate the situation to the woman she was helping.

Another issue that many women mentioned was a lack of information given to refugees about Canadian systems and services, and their feeling that workers were not always honest with refugees about their entitlements. One woman with two young children was receiving only \$600 a month. When she told other Somali women, she realized that she was entitled to \$1000 a month. The women wondered how many more women were not receiving their benefits due to a lack of information about their rights from the social assistance workers.

The problems with the attitudes of social assistance workers may stem from the structure and policies of the social assistance system as a whole. In interviews with government officials from Employment and Income Assistance, we thought there seemed to be a lack of understanding about the cultural, social, and economic backgrounds of refugee women, or their needs. The focus of the system on employment, no matter how low-paying, unskilled, or unattractive, effectively destroys the hopes and dreams of the poor—refugee and non-refugee—by providing only the barest of necessities and withholding support that would allow access to opportunities enjoyed by others. It should be noted that many of the women interviewed stressed a reluctance to ‘complain’ due to a fear of being denied assistance or being sent back to their home countries.

#### *e. Safety*

Refugee women were asked about their feelings of safety in Canada. However, as one respondent pointed out to us, many refugees would say they felt safe because their only point of reference was their lives during wars in their home countries. Therefore, she stressed that while some

women might say they were safe by the standards of their home countries, they were still living in conditions that most Canadians would consider to be unsafe and unacceptable.

While a couple of women felt perfectly safe living in the inner city, many other women had concerns. One woman particularly mentioned the exposure to violence and addictions: *"I don't like [it] there because in downtown there is very noise, and there is drunk people there, and there's like bad things, and I have children. They, if they saw that things, it's not good."*

Living in an area in which they do not feel safe leaving their homes or speaking to other people is stressful and isolating for these women. Many women were concerned about their own and their children's safety and often would not go outside, thereby becoming socially isolated.

The availability and location of subsidized housing are major factors in refugee women's safety. Many respondents live in subsidized housing, which is often located in the inner city. They have no choice but to live in areas of the city where they often do not feel safe. One Somali woman said that she is concerned because she has two children, and they regularly see people selling and using drugs in the apartment building. Many women were also concerned about the location of organizations that serve newcomers to Canada. As many refugees come to Canada with children, they feel that bringing their children to the inner city and having them exposed to crime and gangs upon their introduction to Canada is discouraging and dangerous.

#### *f. Gangs*

Prolonged exposure to homes and neighbourhoods with high levels of gang and other criminal activity creates special

concerns and problems for mothers with young and teenage children. Many women noted that their children regularly see and speak to gang members, and that the presence of gangs begins to seem normal to them. These children have a greater risk of being recruited by gangs, due to their low income and proximity to gang activity.

One Somali woman's story illustrates the process by which many refugee youth are recruited into gangs. Her son was around ten years old when he arrived in Canada with her. He was enrolled in school in a class with other people of his age group, although he spoke no English. He had been living with his mother in a refugee camp and was illiterate in his home language, and did not know any English. His inability to keep up in school, or to relate to people his age due to his horrific experiences in refugee camps, left him frustrated, angry, and with low self-esteem. He became aggressive and got involved with gangs and drugs. He ended up being sent to prison, where he has been for seven years. His mother, who speaks very little English, still does not understand what his crimes were or why he has been in jail for so long.

This story illustrates the fears of many refugee women. Mothers of school-aged children told us that 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 he and his mother were threatened by young people demanding money. Although the woman told the school, the school district, and eventually the police, it did not help. When she put in a request to Manitoba Housing to be relocated to an area outside the inner city for her son's safety, she was told it would take at least four years to relocate her. She was

frustrated and angry and felt that in four years it would be too late for her and her son. As a woman from Colombia pointed out, bullying in schools is often where gang involvement begins.

One of the reasons women gave for young people joining gangs was that they were often living in poverty, including those young people supported by mothers on social assistance. As well, youth refugees often have low levels of education and job experience, and, therefore, cannot make money of their own. Joining a gang may seem like the fastest—or the only—way for young people to make money.<sup>7</sup>

### ***g. Responsibility for Family Members in Home Countries***

Refugees often have to leave family and friends behind when they come to Canada. For many, family members remain in refugee camps. The majority of the women we interviewed have dependents in their homeland whom they are trying to support while also attempting to support themselves. The pressure to meet these needs creates a great deal of stress.

For many of the African women, family responsibilities are part of a cultural tradition of communalism in which people take care of one another and share resources. One woman explained that parents take care of, and sacrifice for, children in the hopes that one day the children will support their aging parents. However, on arriving in Canada, refugees face pressure from a society that is focused on individual needs and individual gain, and are expected to pursue individual success. For refugees with children, a generational conflict emerges between the communal and

individual lifestyles, and children are often too focused on their own personal goals to support the parents who sacrifice for, and support, them.

Being able to send money or other goods to home countries was a key concern among all the respondents, who were virtually all supporting families back home. However, as many are living on social assistance and struggling to meet their own needs, they are incapable of offering support to anyone else. 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 noted she would like to go to school to train for a job in health care. However, she would have to take out a loan and would be unable to support her family. Therefore, she feels trapped in her current job. Another Somali woman said that this was a painful trend among refugee women.

The expectations of families in the home countries also present difficulties to refugees. Many women's families assumed that they were very well off in Canada and should be able to send money. One woman noted that it was difficult to make families back home understand that just because they live in Canada does not mean they are wealthy. But the relative nature of poverty is difficult for families in Africa to understand when many of them are struggling for survival. As a result, refugee women experience extreme guilt and great pressure to assist their families back home.

*And that's why it's such a struggle, to carry a pain with you every day, knowing the kind of conditions that they live in, not*

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7. For more on issues of safety and security in Winnipeg's inner city see the CCPA publication *Bridging the Community-Police Divide: Safety and Security in Winnipeg's Inner City* by Elizabeth Comack and Jim Silver. [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)



*that only, but they constantly call. They call like 3, 4 in the morning.... 'I need you to send me money right now!'*

Many women were also working toward sponsoring their family members. The process is long, often taking several years, during which time the sponsor often continues to send money back home. When the family member arrives, the sponsor is financially responsible for that person for the first year they live in Canada.

### *i. Men's and Women's Roles*

The women we spoke with also told us how different relationships between men and women are in Canada and the challenges they often face in their relationships with men.

A woman from Sudan said that her relationship changed drastically when she arrived in Winnipeg two years ago with her husband and children. She started a job right away and then went to school, while her husband also attended school. Their situation was difficult because in Africa the woman traditionally stays home and takes care of the children. Her husband refused to help her at home, so she struggled to balance her work, school, and family responsibilities. She told her husband that he had to help her because he was only going to school and had more time than she did, but he was not receptive to changing his role. She feels that African men experience shock at the Canadian lifestyle and at how different men's roles are here. Eventually, she and her husband separated.

One Somali woman was very candid with us about her experiences with the change in relationships between men and women. As a Somali woman and a Muslim, she was married in her late teens to a man 20 years older than she was. He was physi-

cally and mentally abusive towards her, partly due to ideological beliefs about women's place and worth.

*That's what I saw, like the difference in my culture and in men, that we're not important—like we don't count, we don't have a voice, in their world and ... [we are treated] just like dirt—I can't even express into words sometimes how belittling it is for women.*

When she was assaulted by her husband's friends, her husband did not defend her, and instead blamed her for the attack.

*So that told me right there, was telling me the fact that I was not important. I was really not important, in their world; I was not important, right? So from then on, I was very angry, I realized like the differences of other Canadian people, how they treat—like men, how they treat me, and how in terms of the Canadian culture, how respected I am as a woman, as an individual, you know, as a person. Not like that. I have rights and all that—when I realized that, that was it.*

The impacts of her experiences and the differences she saw in Canada finally helped her to break free from her abusive relationship and stand up for herself as a person: *"I think what most empowered me, for me, was having a system that was supporting me. For my rights."*

It should be noted, however, that a new set of economic and social challenges confront many women who choose to leave their husbands. As noted by one respondent who eventually left her spouse, *"I don't have a choice, in my religion. When you're married ... I cannot divorce a man ... I would have divorced him a long time ago."* The stigma and the loss of social and financial supports create extreme pressure on many women who choose to 'go it alone'.

Other respondents would not elaborate on the difference in relationships between men and women in Canada, but many were quick to smile and nod when asked if there was a difference. An awareness of the cultural and ideological barriers that influence what women can do and achieve in Canada is therefore essential to understanding refugee women's lives.

### **Community Involvement**

The lack of family networks and resources leads many refugees to recognize the need to join together to support one another. The Sudanese community in Winnipeg has recently purchased a community centre where they can organize their own programs. Organizers at the Sudanese Community Cultural and Resource Centre plan to offer advanced English language training, children's programs, and other resources for the Sudanese community. In the spring of 2006, the African community living in the Central Park neighbourhood established a summer market. The market, which was operational every Saturday during the summer months, was a place for people to meet and sell their crafts and other goods. This is contributing to a greater sense of belonging and new ideas of how they can create their own economic development opportunities.

Somali women are also beginning to organize their own networks of support. They have recently formed a group that they call the Somali Canadian Family and Youth Association. The women gather weekly to cook together, practise their English, and participate in activities with their children. One of the founders of the

group expressed her feelings about the newly formed organization:

*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.*

Getting together to talk about their issues is critical for refugees as they slowly adapt to their new home. There is a need to talk about the past as well as the present. African refugees who have survived horrific experiences on their journeys often attempt to put it all behind them when they reach safety. However, many are still struggling with the effects of living in war-torn countries.

One Somali woman described the effects of post-traumatic stress:

*All of a sudden the post traumatic stress just hit me.... I'm thinking about the past ... they just keep coming back to me like a movie. All these emotions I've been suppressing for all these years; they just came out in front of me. And then I'm looking at them ... I started crying. I don't cry. I couldn't stop crying for days.*

Forming ties with one another and reaching out to mainstream Canadian society is not always easy for refugees. Some were hesitant to share in any great detail, possibly due to challenges communicating in English, or out of reluctance or a lack of trust to share the horrors of their journeys with strangers. Many who did share their stories did so in the hope that it would give Canadians a better idea of the challenges refugees face and the opportunity to hear refugee voices.

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## 6. Policy Issues

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The stories we heard through the interviews and focus groups we conducted provided common themes, regarding which we were able to identify broad policy issues.

1. The depth and breadth of challenges for refugees have increased. There has been an increase in the number of refugees from African countries. These refugees come to Canada with deep and complicated issues as a result of their experiences with extreme poverty and violence. Services have not been able to keep up with the demand and the changing need.

There is a need for much more intensive long-term supports for refugees to help them through the long process of resettlement. But services are overloaded and after some initial resettlement supports, refugees are often left to their own devices.

2. There seems to be a lack of information about programs and services available and how they work. The women interviewed were often unaware of some of the services available to them and/or were given different information, depending on who they spoke with. In part, the information received appeared to depend on the caseworkers assigned to clients and on what seemed to be arbitrary decisions made by caseworkers. While the policy of some discretion over what supports to provide can sometimes work in favour of clients, it often does not. It also gives clients little options for recourse.

3. The challenges revealed by the women we spoke with lead us to believe that there is a need for greater sensitivity to the experience of refugees. This is particularly the case for EIA staff at both frontline and management levels.

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## 7. Policy Recommendations

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### **Better Coordination of Programs**

#### *a. Create a more holistic service delivery model*

Governments at all levels must recognize that refugees do not come with needs that can be met through the current ‘silos’ of various levels of governments and individual departments. Governments must learn ways of responding to refugees in a more holistic fashion and supports provided must be regular, intense, and ongoing. The adjustment process is slow. As noted by one community-based service provider, we cannot simply find someone a home, put them on social assistance, and let them figure it out from there. We need to help them gain access to training and help them find jobs. The journey for refugees is a long and painful one that does not end when they arrive in Canada. We must be sensitive to this and find better ways to assist them through this important stage of their journey.

### **ESL Programs**

#### *a. Improve access to ESL by reducing wait times for courses and providing free childcare*

As many women’s childcare responsibilities make it impossible for them to attend courses, this action would enable more women to attend courses, without having to pay additional childcare fees that they cannot afford.

#### *b. Train and hire immigrant and refugee teachers who speak the same language as the students*

Many women felt that whenever possible, immigrants and refugees should be taught

by individuals who speak their language. As one respondent elaborated:

*Because they need interpreters in order to understand the English language, they need somebody to translate what is written there, and in my own experience I’ve seen people learn the English language more easily when they are with — when it’s being taught by people of their own.*

This is essential in order for the students to be able to relate to their teachers and for teachers to have an understanding of the students’ concerns. This would also create jobs for immigrants and refugees, and ensure that students are learning language skills in a supportive and constructive environment.

#### *c. Evaluate ESL programs and include student evaluations*

In order to direct and tailor ESL programs, it is vital for the organizations that run the programs to evaluate their success. One Somali woman suggested that assessments should attempt to determine whether students understood what they were taught, whether they followed the course, what they would like to learn more about, whether they were able to complete assignments, and whether the program was having the desired results. This kind of follow-up would ensure that funds spent on creating ESL programs and implementing them were being used in the most beneficial and appropriate way.

#### *d. Create course content that is participatory, engaging, and goal-oriented*

Refugee women wanted the opportunity to learn how to speak, read, and write in



English. They said the programs they had participated in did not engage the students in conversations. They felt that doing so would help them to learn English more quickly and easily. As well, ensuring that the course had goals and objectives would enable teachers to evaluate the student's level of comprehension. Materials for courses should be developed, in participation with immigrants and refugees. ESL courses should have books for the students.

### **Social Assistance**

#### ***a. Encourage compassion, comprehension, and understanding from social assistance workers***

The experience of relying on social assistance is stressful and demoralizing. The experience is worsened when workers are insensitive. One respondent suggested:

*... the first thing is when the person feels that he's being treated in a very respectful manner; he's open to embrace any suggestions as to how he can improve his life. You can give him opportunities, tell him where to find opportunities, and he will go, because nobody wants to be in Social Assistance. It's all about human interaction, how you deal with people. And that is becoming very difficult. Most of the immigrants are new to Canada, they come from Africa, they have their own culture, they find quite very difficult to embrace this new culture, and being treated in a way that doesn't respect their way or life, or shows them that they are unable to work or they don't want to work — it's very shameful.*

Counteracting the apathy or detachment of caseworkers could include training about the experiences of refugees and their special needs, cultural sensitivity training, and opportunities for workers to meet with low-income refugees in a more egalitarian and sharing atmosphere. It should be a matter of practice to provide refugee clients with translation services in all meetings with EIA staff.

tarian and sharing atmosphere. It should be a matter of practice to provide refugee clients with translation services in all meetings with EIA staff.

#### ***b. Educate refugees about their rights and responsibilities***

Refugee women wanted to be informed of their rights with regard to social assistance. This includes what decisions social assistance caseworkers have discretion over, what clients are entitled to receive, and what their responsibilities are in order to continue to receive benefits. Positions could be created for refugees as advocates to explain the system to newcomers and ensure that they receive information and understand it. As well, these advocates could act as interpreters, a role that many refugees are currently fulfilling on a voluntary basis. This would create meaningful employment for refugees, and would increase the diversity of the social assistance workforce, encouraging understanding and sensitivity.

#### ***c. Change the current emphasis on 'work first' to allow social assistance recipients to pursue education, including high school equivalency***

This would allow refugees and all social assistance recipients to increase their employability and their chance of finding well-paying work. As one woman from Vietnam said,

*When you do not have a good job it has a bad impact on your home life, your family ... it makes every small problem very big. If they want to have a healthy community, they have to have the basic needs met. Have to have a strong foundation. It connects to family, community and society.*

This requires far-sightedness on the part of government and a commitment to invest in the most vulnerable people, including refugees.

### **Community Organizations**

#### ***a. Increase government support for community-based organizations providing essential services to refugees***

Women spoke of the need for many community-based services. Women wanted to have cultural centres where they could bring their children and meet other people who speak their mother language. They would like parenting courses to teach them how to discipline their children in keeping with Canadian customs. As well, they would like to see more recreational programs and counselling services for youth to help keep them off the street and out of gangs. Centres for refugees would provide opportunities to form friendships and build communities.

#### ***b. Provide counselling services geared specifically toward refugees to help them deal with emotional trauma***

This is one crucial service that can be provided by community organizations, and that refugees desperately need in order to deal with emotional trauma. As Hawa's story illustrates, refugees often experience situations of fear and violence that leave them emotionally traumatized. Once in Canada, refugees may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as culture shock, as they adjust to their new roles and responsibilities. Counsellors—especially those who come from refugees' countries of origin and understand their language, culture, and experiences—can provide sensitive, culturally appropriate

counsel. Refugees must be provided with a safe and supportive environment in which to address their past experiences and their future goals.

#### ***c. Provide greater resources for outreach***

While community-based services exist in some communities, communication and promotion of these services are often inadequate. Positions should be created for immigrants and refugees to do outreach into these communities. These positions would increase the visibility and use of services by refugees, and would provide refugees with community workers who are familiar with their culture and language.

One Somali woman described why this is needed:

*These programs—these people cannot speak the language, right? So many times they do not even know what's going on in the community. And the second thing is that somehow, they do not feel comfortable in participating, or feel trusted to let go. Especially the younger ones, to let go to people they do not know. So they need a different approach to get those kids and a different sensitivity.... We need people who understand, the situation, right? They can understand—you have to understand the parents' skills, you have to understand the kids' needs.*

#### ***d. Support immigrant- and refugee-led economic development***

Using a community economic development model, in which the community is empowered to design, create, and implement programs with social, cultural, and economic relevance and responsibility, the refugee community could build its eco-

conomic base. Women expressed interest in refugee-run community stores and businesses. These would often be based on a social enterprise model and would therefore require government assistance to start up and become financially stable.

### **Cultural Sensitivity from Organizations**

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

Women also stressed the need for cultural sensitivity and compassion from organizations and workers who serve immigrant and refugee communities. It is important for workers to understand what it is like to be a refugee, and all the challenges and stresses involved. As well, refugees would often like to be helped and introduced to Canada by someone from the same cultural background and who speaks their language. Immigrant and refugee workers representative of the shifting demographic profile could be trained to work in these organizations. They would have experienced first-hand what it is like to be a newcomer to Canada and would have empathy and compassion for other newcomers.

### **Housing**

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

While some of the women interviewed liked living in the inner city, many did not because they felt unsafe there. There should be more options available for refugee women. Refugees often do not own vehicles and, therefore, access to public transportation and close proximity to grocery stores, hospitals, schools, and other resources must be considered.

### **Cultural Sensitivity in Immigration Policy**

#### *a. Increase awareness of the family values and responsibilities of refugees*

Many women felt that the federal and provincial immigration departments and, in particular, Employment and Income Assistance, need a greater understanding of the family responsibilities and values of many refugees. It should be taken into account that refugees who come here have people to support back home. Many refugees' lives in Canada are greatly affected by their obligations to support families in their home countries and social assistance caseworkers should be sensitive to this reality.

#### *b. Decrease wait times for sponsoring family members*

Refugee women wanted to be able to bring their families here, for their safety, but also to create a network of support here in Canada. If families are reunited more quickly in Canada, they can help and support each other to get ahead here. One Somali woman offered the example that if her mother were here in Canada, her mother could watch her child during the day. This would enable the Somali woman to attend school and train for a better job. Building family supports could therefore increase the resources available to refugees and decrease their reliance on social assistance.

### **Education, Training, and Employment**

#### *a. Develop bursaries and scholarships for immigrants and refugees*

Many refugees are on social assistance and cannot afford to pay for higher education.

Current policy in universities often excludes immigrants and refugees from applying for scholarships and bursaries. Many women felt that resources should be developed to offer funding and awards specifically to immigrants and refugees. This would enable them to train for well-paying jobs, ensuring that their futures are secure and stable.

***b. Educate refugees about employment rights and responsibilities***

Refugees arrive and are expected to function within a system that is foreign to them. Many of the women we spoke to expressed the desire to learn more about the system, including the roles of employer and employee, how to look for a job, how to save money, and how to bank money. Such an education would enable refugees to make informed decisions about finding and keeping a job, and managing money safely and effectively.

***c. Increase opportunities for immigrants and refugees to improve their employment skills***

This is an essential goal that has many diverse components. It includes changes to social assistance policy as discussed above. As well, refugees are often pressured to apply for jobs that do not fit their interests. One woman from Colombia was being pressured by her social assistance worker to apply to work in health care positions, as there are many opportunities in that field. However, the woman was not qualified or interested in working in health care.

We heard this pressure first-hand from Employment and Income Assistance rep-

resentatives. They told us that they analyze newcomers for their “skill set” upon arrival in Canada. However, this means that people are pushed into low-wage jobs they may not be interested in simply because it is what they have experience doing. Their dreams of expanding or improving their skills are ignored. Women whom we interviewed felt that their individual desires are not taken into account and they are expected to be satisfied with any job.

***d. Encourage a diverse and culturally sensitive workforce***

This includes cultural sensitivity training in workplaces, but also means encouraging the hiring of people from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds. One Somali woman experienced discrimination in the workforce as a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, the traditional covering over her head. She said that when employers see her wearing the hijab or hear her speaking with an accent, she never gets called back for a job.

These suggestions and recommendations can result in meaningful employment for refugees and help them to realize the goals and dreams with which they arrived. Refugees arriving from war-torn countries have a high level of needs and these needs should be met with sensitivity and understanding. Refugees arrive with the determination and initiative to study, work, and participate in Canadian society. 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.

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## Conclusion

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Hearing the voices of refugee women highlights the needs and challenges faced by refugees coming to Canada. It is nearly impossible for those born in Canada to imagine experiencing war, violence and hunger, and arriving in a new country with no resources and no family. However, it is possible for Canadians to hear these stories and attempt to better understand the harrowing situation refugees leave behind and the challenges they face in Canada.

With a greater understanding and sensitivity, Canadian governments and settlement and social service organizations can begin to design services and offer opportunities that will address concrete needs; adequate and culturally appropriate language training, education and employment training, and social support that adequately meets health needs and has the flexibility to allow refugees to care for chil-

dren, return to school or attend training to upgrade skills or learn a new skill set. Other services and programs should address intangible issues that greatly affect well being, including counseling for emotional trauma and cultural shock, the need for family security and support, a sense of belonging in communities and Canadian society, and recognition of refugees' skills and gifts.

Investing in refugees to ensure that their transition is as positive and supportive as possible will have long-term benefits for us all. Encouraging and empowering a diverse, skilled, healthy and happy newcomer population will ensure that the next generation—youth refugees and the children of refugees—will have access to the education and employment opportunities that their parents continue to dream of for them.

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