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POSITION PAPER

Topic: Accessibility of Language and Employment Programs for Refugee Women

According to the United Nations, there are currently over 65.3 million displaced people worldwide, the largest number ever known. Canada resettled 30,000 refugees last year, 41% of whom were children under the age of twelve and around half of whom were women. Another 980 Government-Assisted refugees will be resettled in British Columbia in 2017, including many Yazidi women and children.

Newcomer services in British Columbia and across Canada have responded to keep up with the demand for settlement services. Frequently however, they fail to take into account the specific needs of refugee women. Many language training and employment programs--designed around the male head of household--are inaccessible to mothers and children. As a result, the integration process for refugee women slows, and many individuals remain in isolation for years without learning English or being able to contribute their skills in the Canadian workforce. On a daily basis, this inhibits a refugee woman's ability to communicate with her children's teachers, take an active role in her child's education, make friends, and integrate into Canadian society. In many cases, mothers become dependent on their children or husbands for translation and economic security, which disempowers them further and puts additional stress on their young ones.

Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS), a non-profit serving immigrant and refugee women and their children since 1975, believes the needs of refugee women must be integrated into the design of language and employment programs and taken more seriously. Currently, some of the main challenges refugee women face in accessing programs can be divided into the categories of Childcare, Lack of classroom flexibility, and Coed classes.

Childcare

Refugees spend long periods of time on waitlists for the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program. Once admitted, many refugee women cannot accept places due to childcare constraints. While some LINC classes offer childminding services, many do not. Additionally, childminding services have an 18-month-old minimum age-restriction. Therefore, a refugee woman must wait for her youngest to reach this age before she can attend. Babies and young toddlers are not allowed in LINC classrooms. When there is no childminding service, women are asked to find their own daycare arrangements and apply for childcare subsidies. The daycare system and long waitlists across the Lower Mainland are overwhelming for native English-speakers. For refugee women who do not know the language and for whom such systems are foreign, this is a major barrier.

Delays in language training impact a refugee woman's ability to access other programs such as employment. Many job search and skills-training programs for newcomers require LINC Level 4 as the minimum requisite. Women who make it through to Level 4 or above and manage to access employment programs are faced again with the issue of childcare upon finding work. Some refugee women are unable to accept job offers because they cannot find or afford childcare. Since full-time employment means transitioning off of welfare, daycare would take a large chunk of a mother's paycheque.

Lack of Classroom Flexibility

Generally the primary caregivers within families, many refugee women struggle with the lack of flexibility in classrooms. For example, they know that if they miss more than two LINC classes, their spot may be taken

from them. High expectations and rigid rules around attendance are unrealistic for women whose responsibilities to their families may prevent them from coming to every class. Sick children and Pro-D days are common examples of why women are forced to stay home.

Additionally, trauma experienced as part of a refugee woman's forced migration to Canada can impact her ability to learn, recall information, attend classes, and do well on assessments. When instructors are unfamiliar with the impact of trauma on their students' learning, they may misread symptoms as disengagement, poor effort, and incompetency.

Coed Classes

In some cases, Coed learning environments are a barrier to a refugee women's participation in settlement programs. This can be for a variety of reasons, including discomfort or unfamiliarity with mixed learning environments, or simply because of a refugee woman's expectation that the male head of household will attend on behalf of the family.

Additionally, topics such as women's health, domestic violence, and parenting in a new country aren't usually covered in Coed spaces. Resources shared in LINC classrooms are not targeted to include programs and referral information specific to the needs of refugee women, which differ from the general immigrant population and from refugee men.

In the case of employment programs, women-only classes allow for a cohesive group who share similar goals. Women with gaps in their employment find that they share obstacles in common with others in their class who have been out of the workforce due to motherhood, migration to Canada, and trouble obtaining Canadian experience. For women who have never been in a workplace setting before, coed employment programs, where it is rare for a male head of household not to have held previous employment, can be intimidating.

Coed settlement programs also tend to be very general in their recruitment and do not always reach the spaces in which refugee women actively participate, such as their children's schools and informal networks of friendship. There is also a struggle to recruit elderly refugee women who have been in isolation for long periods.

Recommendations

Refugee women need not be excluded from language and employment programs. There are ways to support their participation. Programs can make childcare more accessible and flexible in their age-restrictions, create classrooms that are trauma-informed and responsive, understand the commitments refugee women may have outside the classroom, offer female-only options, and adapt recruitment strategies which encourage a refugee woman's enrollment. Ensuring that educators understand refugee issues and trauma. There are models to look at. PIRS has been designing programs around the needs of newcomer women since 1975. Neighbourhood houses and small community organizations have also been leaders in providing flexible, informal learning spaces. In these programs, refugee women can attend and bring children with them into the classroom. However, small community organizations cannot carry the sole responsibility of refugee women's integration. They require the support and awareness of larger community organizations, institutions, partners, and government in order to continue their work.

Refugee women can and are important contributors in our society. It costs us economically and socially to overlook the important roles they can play. In order to assist them in reaching their full potential in Canada, we must ensure that the design of settlement programs are not inadvertently overlooking their needs and excluding their participation.

Recommendations by Mariam Bouchoutrouch, (Executive Director, PIRS), Amea Wilbur, (Manager of Programs), and Zahida Rahemtulla (Outreach Support Worker)