

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada: Lived Experience, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 5

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) hosted a six-part digital series focused on Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and integration. The series aimed to engage stakeholders to consider Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and identify changes to policy and practice that will make Canada more inclusive and responsive to refugees' needs. Over the course of the six sessions, refugees, settlement workers and service providers, policymakers, researchers, and students were brought together to share insights and lessons learned from lived experience, settlement practice, and research.

The fifth session of the series took place on February 19th, 2021 and featured four speakers – Olamide Agboola, Irfan Tarin, Tessy Ojar, and Fahad Amir Nsubuga – discussing their lived experiences of refugee resettlement in Canada. The session was moderated by Sohail Shahidnia, a PhD student in Policy Studies at Ryerson University.

Summary of responses by Fahad Amir Nsubuga (paraphrased)

- Fahad was born in Uganda and came to Canada in 2016. He normally thinks of himself as more of a motivational speaker, but the politics in this country are turning him into an activist.
- Fahad researched Canada before coming and tried to make connections with family and friends of friends. On the day of his arrival, he tried calling his contacts in Canada, but their phones were off. He stayed with a man he met in the airport and a friend of a friend before finally reaching his cousins and moving to Scarborough to stay with them. Only at this point was he able to start getting used to his new surroundings and working on his refugee case.
- Housing has been very challenging. Fahad met with landlords who would say to his face that he could rent an apartment, but he would later receive calls saying that he could not have the apartment after all. He felt that many of the places he visited were not expecting a Black man to show up and had probably never had a Black tenant. He was asked for his passport by some landlords but does not believe that being born in Canada would have made a difference because he was ultimately being profiled because he is Black and specifically a Black man.
- Fahad also briefly lost his primary source of income while looking for an apartment, and some landlords used this as a reason not to rent to him.
- After spending some time in Canada, Fahad decided to go to school because he would be able to get experience and study simultaneously. He feels that the education system in Canada is good, particularly because of financial support like OSAP which does not happen in his previous country.
- Fahad has had very good and very bad experiences with people in Canada. For example, when he had not yet learned to use google maps, a person he asked for

directions from walked with him. However, the first time he was on the TTC, he asked for directions, and a woman moved her purse away from him.

- Fahad has sometimes tried to remain calm when experiencing racism because Black men are profiled as being short-tempered. However, he does regret some moments. For example, he used to work for an employer who made racist comments about Black workers, and he wishes that he had spoken up. Fahad says that it is very important to learn employment laws and housing regulations. Employers often employ new immigrants knowing that they do not know anything. If he had known the laws, he would have known how to stand up for himself and others.
- Fahad says that it would be helpful if caseworkers provided clients with pamphlets to teach them about Canadian regulations. People need to know that being immigrants does not mean they are inhuman: they have rights. Otherwise, they will meet bad people who will take advantage of them. Pamphlets do not need to be detailed but need to point to where newcomers can find information.
- Fahad says that despite his many grave experiences, the government in Canada has really tried, and he does not believe that they are setting out to frustrate people. However, Canada needs to market itself better in order for things to progress. Most people do not know much about Canada aside from that it is cold because little has been done to market Canada worldwide, but the things marketed about other countries like the USA and the UK are also in Canada.
- It is necessary for employers to take a risk on newcomers' experience. No one can get experience without being tried.
- Credit is also a common issue for newcomers (e.g. cannot get house because do not have credit history). Not all countries are working with a system of credit.
- Fahad regrets not knowing about some opportunities earlier and says that there is no platform for that information. Rules and laws change every day, but newcomers often find themselves listening to people who arrived ten years ago who may not even know that the system has changed. Most people here do many things online, but some people do not even know what to search for when they get here.
- Platforms like this should be given more attention in general. Many people have a lot on their minds but do not know where to go to speak: "You can't help someone you don't talk to, and you can't help someone you don't listen to."
- Fahad is glad he is here, and encourages people to come: "In general, Canada has been the best thing that has happened to me as a person."

Summary of responses by Irfan Tarin (paraphrased)

- Irfan is from Afghanistan and used to work as a Doctor. He recently moved to Canada and has been here for ~7 months. His experience so far has not been bad, but he moved in 2020, which was a tough time for everyone and greatly impacted his settlement experience. His family has had to face the same stress and challenges as regular immigrants, but also the challenges of the lockdown. Usually, when people come to Canada, they can go out and interact with people, but his family came at a time when even family members were not interacting, so it has been very difficult
- When they first arrived, his family stayed in Brampton in a relative's house. They wanted to move to their own place but had difficulty because they did not have a credit history or employment history in Canada. The family now lives in North York.

- Irfan thinks that Canada is very immigrant-friendly. Settlement services have online platforms about living, culture, the job market, education, etc., but there are limitations to these. He is lucky to understand English and computers, but the people he has met have been the most helpful in identifying services and he would not have known about them otherwise.
- Irfan has encountered people during the pandemic who say that they are enjoying this time working from home and being relaxed. This is distressing to him because it has impacted his experience greatly and limited his access to services. He wanted to get his driver's licence when he arrived and have his experience translated to English, but when he contacted these offices, they said that they were not providing those services because of the pandemic.
- The big challenge he faced in settlement more than housing was employment. The first reason for this was that people who were so experienced were losing their jobs during this time, making it even harder than usual for a newcomer to find employment. The second reason was specific to his profession: he is a doctor, and, despite this being a time when they need this profession very much, people who come with experience from other countries are not accepted. With doctors, it is not just the accreditation process. There are also many, many challenges essentially saying to the person not to continue their profession anymore. Doctors need to get their degrees accredited, then spend many years and money training for the entrance exam, then they need to spend money to get experience before they can be accepted. During this time, they also need to cover their personal expenses and family needs.
- Irfan feels that the government should have more opportunities for internationally trained medical workers (e.g. bridging pathways to nursing or medical assistant positions). It is a waste of time that someone who spends ten years of their life to become a doctor still needs to spend another five years to be recognized in Canada. It is also a waste of experience because Canada could use internationally trained doctors to improve society. He argues that he has specific experience from the hospital he worked in in Afghanistan. Some of the cases he saw because he was in a warzone would be unfamiliar to doctors here, and Canada could benefit from his expertise. He understands the need for regulations but knows that 99% of internationally trained workers do not work in the profession they trained for, and this is neither benefiting them, nor the government.
- The experience before coming to Canada and what he is experiencing now are not even comparable: “but I am very glad that the best things are being offered here and they are still working on it – still saying, ‘we can do better.’ That is the greatest thing.”
- The best thing you experience here is that it is a democratic country where you have your own mind, thoughts, and choices.
- Suggestion: There should be an organization in the community to recognize and help people improve their skills to match those that are needed in the Canadian labour market. People could work in a different but related profession in the same field initially and train while being paid. Then, after 4 or 5 years, they could move to the same profession as before, without worrying about money or employment.
- These types of platforms are good for sharing – this is the first time someone has asked these questions: “we face challenges, but no one asks.”

Summary of responses by Tessy Ojar (paraphrased)

- Tessy is originally from Nigeria and moved to Canada in 2019. Her experience so far has been good. She has an Economics degree and a Master's degree in Finance. She currently works as a PSW and has also been volunteering with NGOs such as the Together Project to help refugee mothers settle in Canada.
- She initially stayed in a shelter (the Radisson Hotel) where she was able to connect with other refugees but building a network has otherwise not been easy. She has relied mostly on volunteering for opportunities network and connect.
- Housing has been a challenge. Many landlords do not accept refugees, so refugees often end up having to pay more than others because they are relegated to only specific landlords who charge more. Tessy has moved out of the shelter and currently lives in Scarborough.
- People say that racism in Canada is not as bad as in other countries, but when something is not spoken about, it is felt worse because it goes unacknowledged. Black women often experience profiling.
- The first time Tessy went to the bank, after seeing her SIN, the teller refused to open an account because she was a refugee and it was against their policy. Until then, Tessy did not know that her SIN was different: "Why would they give us a SIN that would set limits on what we can do?"
- Tessy had her credentials evaluate with WES and started looking for jobs in line with her career path, but employment has been a challenge, and she has had to take work outside of her training. She did a course in customer service, but once the pandemic hit, she decided to take a job as a PSW to help out during the crisis. She did not have a PSW certificate but had experience from the USA working with people with developmental disabilities. She found jobs on Care.com and Indeed. She went into this career because she sees long-term care as an area in which Canada needs a lot of help and because she was told that this would demonstrate her value in her refugee hearing.
- Even when doing a job like this, she faces discrimination. For example, in a situation where a resident was assaulted by another resident, the staff was called together and asked on to speak to their experience with the resident and whether or not they had ever been aggressive. Everyone else was allowed to speak, but when it was Tessy's time to talk, the person who was handling the discussion passed over her. She was the only Black person in the room.
- Tessy received support from COSTI, as well as from the NGO she volunteers with – the Together Project – which has sent her meals, personal care items, and invites her to seminar opportunities, etc. People working in conjunction with Ontario Works have also checked in on her every once in a while, and the Syrian Canadian Foundation has been helpful with recreational opportunities for her daughter.
- Employment representatives in Canada have been very unhelpful. Many jobs are reserved for permanent residents and people end up having to pick jobs entirely outside of their career path just to show that they have experience.
- Tessy says that in general Canada is very refugee-friendly. She says this as someone who has been to two other countries and seen how they respond to refugees and how difficult it is to migrate. In some countries like the UK, it takes you up to ten years to

get status. Here in Canada, the policies are so friendly that you can come here, and in two years, you are a permanent resident. The Canadian government also provides a lot of support. In some countries, you do not receive any support and they do not care if you are coming from a war zone, but in Canada, they make provisions for those little things and when you save on those small things, it helps you to live better.

- The government is receptive, but you cannot have it all. The majority of people are welcoming to immigrants, but some are not. The job market is challenging, but it is not really better in other countries.
- Many settlement resources exist, but newcomers do not know about them. Some resources are also not accessible to everyone. Making things available in more communities is also needed to allow people to make use of opportunities.

Summary of responses by Olamide Agboola (paraphrased)

- Olamide is originally from Nigeria and moved to Canada in September 2019. She is an Accountant by training and loves to organize, cook, be creative, and make people happy. Her journey to Canada was initially very rough but has been getting better.
- Olamide came in as a landed refugee with her husband and two sons, and she was pregnant at the time. The family had to go to a hotel which they paid for themselves. They exhausted their savings within two weeks and did not know what to do. Someone told them to reach out to First Contact. They were given a temporary space to sleep and keep warm, but food and transportation were up to them.
- Eventually they got a space in a family shelter where food was no longer a problem. However, there were still small challenges (e.g. night checks, things you cannot do in the shelter), and the family realized that they could not stay there for too long. As they began looking for a place to rent, landlords wanted references, credit history, etc., which was frustrating and demoralizing.
- They eventually got a call from a landlord after three months in Canada (two weeks after Olamide delivered the baby). The family showed up, and when the landlord saw the baby, he let them rent the house. The family is now living in Brampton and happy.
- She has volunteered in many places in Canada (e.g. the Salvation Army, English conversation with seniors, etc.) and also connected with the Syrian Canadian Foundation. The Salvation Army has been the most supportive organization for Olamide – in every sphere, they have been there for her.
- The least supportive figures have been landlords and employers. Every time she would apply to get a job, they would turn her down once the employer would hear about her status: “They do not even want to hear you out.”
- Housing, employment, transportation, childcare have been Olamide’s greatest challenges in settlement.
- In order to find housing, she tried to find a job to get an employment letter, she got a credit card to build credit, and maintained a healthy savings balance to show landlords. In Nigeria, they are taught that credit is a bad thing, and everyone lives within their means. Having a credit card is an unfamiliar concept.
- For employment, she got her credentials evaluated by WES, took courses to improve listening skills in English, took training and seminars to learn workplace culture and labour market norms, made friends and found information about volunteering, and got

her CV updated. While volunteering, she met a contact who referred her to a job and she now works as a Program Coordinator at the Salvation Army.

- Transportation remains a challenge because having children limits mobility around Canada. Navigating to find the right bus stop is difficult. She has wasted so much time on the wrong busses and sometimes needs to leave two hours ahead of appointments to ensure that she gets there on time.
- For childcare, Olamide shares responsibility with her husband. She works during the day while her husband takes care of the children, and then when she comes home at night he goes to work.
- Things that Olamide appreciates about Canada:
 - The Canadian health system: Olamide lost her son to illness because of the poor health system in her previous country and the strict visa requirements preventing her from leaving her country to seek treatment.
 - Housing: when Olamide's family had exhausted their money, the government put a roof over their head.
 - Education: Olamide could not go to school due to money, but the government offers many free trainings for refugees.
 - Financing: the government contributes a lot of support to help people when they cannot get a Job.
 - Food banks: a system that works well and encourages people to settle in.
 - "I have not seen a government taking care of new citizens the way this government does."
- In order to improve the settlement experience, Olamide envisions an information centre for refugees. Right now, newcomers need to rely on hearsay, but such a centre would ensure that everyone is on the same page. A refugee training centre where past skills are being tested is also needed. It could be a three-month intensive training where participants would be paid a minimum wage. They could learn reliable information about Canadian experience, credit, financial management, insurance, etc. – key areas that people may not know about. Another suggestion is a portal providing people who want to appear anonymous because of their status an opportunity to offer suggestions for improvement without being castigated for saying something.

Discussion Notes (paraphrased)

- It is important to listen. Sessions like this are not just an opportunity for refugees to be heard. Caseworkers and settlement professionals also need to be at forums like this and listen and do continuing education to ensure that they provide proper referrals to their clients.