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Somali Refugee Resettlement in Canada

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1. Context

Since the mid-1980s, thousands of Somalis have come to Canada fleeing human rights abuses by the regime of Mohamed Siad Barre and the civil war that ensued following the downfall of the regime in 1991. A fifth of the Somali population was thought to have left Somalia and sought refuge in other countries by 1990. [1] According to one estimate, about 55,000 Somalis arrived in Canada just between 1988 and 1996; [2] others put the figure closer to 70,000. [3] Somalia still has no stable government to this day and has been considered as the most 'fragile state' in the world for 6 years in a row, only to be overtaken by South Sudan since 2014. [4]

When Somali refugees first arrived in the 1980s, there was no established Somali community waiting for them in Canada. In the first decade of Somali resettlement, Somali refugees therefore had a very difficult experience settling in Canada. [2] Those who arrived after 2002 fared relatively better in terms of socio-economic outcomes compared to the first cohort, according to IRCC reports, showing the benefits of having existing social networks. [5] Nevertheless, the introduction of questionable immigration policies had the most devastating impact on Somali refugees.

2. Differential treatment of Somali refugees

Canada has a proud resettlement history and the People of Canada are the only recipients of UNHCR's Nansen Award to have received it as a nation, for their contribution to the causes of refugees inside Canada and abroad. However, Canadians were ill-prepared to receive Somalis, in contrast to refugees from the 1979-1980 Indochinese crisis, as mentioned in a previous Metropolis Conversation report. [6] While refugees from Indochina were welcomed and adequately supported by the federal government, and various church and community groups, Somali refugees were not accorded the same welcome and resettlement support.

Most Somalis entered Canada as refugee claimants and through family reunification. Somalis constituted only 2% of Government Assisted Refugee (GAR) landings from 1993-2001, and 4% from 2002-2009. [5] Refugee claims from Somalis had high rates of acceptance at the Immigration and Refugee Board, generally above 90% between 1990 and 1993. [2] Afterwards, the acceptance rates dropped gradually to current rates of 57% (for the period January-June 2015). [7]

An amendment to the *Immigration Act* (Bill C-86) was introduced in 1993 and affected particularly Somali and Afghan refugees. [2] All applicants, including refugees, were required to have passports or 'satisfactory' IDs in order to be granted landing (permanent residence). Section 46.04 (8) of the former *Immigration Act* read:

> An Immigration Officer shall not grant landing either to an applicant under subsection (1) or to any dependent of the applicant until the applicant is in possession of a valid and subsisting Passport or travel document or a satisfactory identity document.

According to the government, the purpose of this amendment was to discourage refugee claimants from destroying their travel documents and thus to combat immigration fraud. [8] However, many Somali Convention Refugees approved by the IRB were unable to obtain Permanent Resident (Landing) status as a direct result of this amendment. In the absence of a central government in Somalia following the collapse of the previous regime in 1991, there was no authority to issue or renew passports and valid identity documents in Somalia. This lack of documentation kept Somalis in Canada in a limbo status. Afghan refugees were similarly affected. In 1996, CIC/IRCC officials estimated that 7,500 Somali and Afghan Convention refugees (90% of whom were Somalis) were unable to get landed/permanent residence, [8] and the number of people in limbo increased to 13,000 by 1999. [9]

As a result of the amendments, affected Convention Refugees were not allowed to:

- Reunite with family members who were abroad.
- Access federal and provincial student loans and bursaries for colleges and university.
- Be eligible for certain types of employment.
- Re-enter Canada if they left. [10]

The Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class was also introduced in 1997 in order to accommodate those who did not have identity documents and were thus in a limbo. However, yet another set of barriers was imposed on this class—a mandatory waiting period of five years was introduced to obtain permanent residence after a positive decision by the IRB. This brought the total waiting period to up to seven years, counting from the time of arrival in Canada. [10] [11]

The issue of identity documents was resolved in 2000 after the government agreed to the settlement of a Charter challenge which was launched four years earlier by a group of Somali refugees. [10] As a result of the settlement, affidavits from individuals or from credible Somali organizations in Canada were accepted in order to attest the identity of Somali refugees. The new *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* issued in 2002 contained the terms of the settlement and the Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class was abolished. [9] But other challenges remain to this day. Documents that Somalis present to establish family relationships are often not accepted, so they are still required to undergo DNA tests when applying for family reunification—this creates delays and increases costs for family reunification. [9]

Other than government policies, the media did not always paint a positive image of Somali refugees. They were assumed to be an economic burden on the social welfare system of Canada, [2] and following the 9/11 attacks in the US, they were increasingly seen as a security threat to Canadians due to their faith. These issues contributed to the hostile environment with which Somali refugees had to contend in the process of settlement and integration. [6] It should therefore come as no surprise that the Somali community experienced a range of negative socio-economic outcomes.

3. Settlement difficulties

Language

In general, most Somalis spoke neither English nor French when they arrived. Language barriers were not only a big challenge for settlement and integration into Canadian society, but they also created delays in the refugee determination process owing to a shortage of Somali interpreters. Most settlement agencies at the time did not provide culturally-appropriate services in Somali language. [2] Moreover, language barriers increased the isolation of Somali refugees (especially women) as they had less access to education even before they fled their country. [2]

Mental Health

Having experienced **(a)** violence back home, **(b)** long waiting periods in refugee camps, and **(c)** prolonged processing periods in Canada, Somali refugees were prone to post-traumatic stress and other mental health issues. The lack of appropriate and culturally-sensitive mental health services in earlier years also increased the settlement challenges of Somali refugees. [6] [10] [9] [2]

Housing

Finding appropriate housing was a challenge especially as Somali families were often large. Private landlords were reluctant to rent their units to racialized refugees most of whom were on social assistance. [11] Many Somalis, especially those on welfare, were asked to provide co-signers with an income above $50,000, and hence were not in a position to rent from the market; they ended-up living in subsidized housing, often in low-income neighborhoods where the quality of services was low. [12]

Women & Youth

The amendments to the *Immigration Act* and the negative impact on family reunification took a toll on the Somali family unit. Single Somali mothers endured hardship in Canada as they had to shoulder more responsibility in raising their children. The majority of the Somali adult population in Canada were initially women, as many men died or remained behind during the civil war in Somalia. [12] Somali mothers—often the only adults in the family—were also

expected to assume new economic responsibilities, such as sending remittances to their family members abroad.

Extended family members used to play an important role in stabilizing marriages and resolving marital disputes. In the absence of the extended family structure, domestic violence and divorce peaked in Somali communities in Canada. [12] This is still the case, as corroborated by another recent study in which high rates of divorce (6%) and separation (8%) were recorded in Somali communities—the highest rates among Arab communities in Canada. [13]

The dismantling of the traditional Somali family unit led in part to negative socio-economic outcomes for Somali youth, many of whom lacked role models in the family. Intergenerational differences also put a strain on the relationship between parents and children. Somali youth faced two cultures (Somali Muslim vs mainstream secular Canadian). [2] [6]

Education

Outcomes on education were also lower for Somalis than for other immigrant populations. According to 2006 Census data, only 13% of Somali Canadian adults[1] had a university degree (compared with 24% of total Canadian adult population). Much fewer Somali women (9%) were university graduates. [5] In terms of other education indicators, the number of Somali-speaking students who dropped out of high school in Toronto was estimated at 25% according to a TDSB commissioned report. Higher suspension rates and lower achievements in standardized tests were also reported. [14] There is however a perception in the community, supported by evidence, that racialized immigrant youth face discrimination in the form of harsher punishments in schools. Even when the most resilient students managed to complete university education, they faced challenges in finding employment.[15] [6]

Employment

In the first "lost" decade of waiting to get their Permanent Residence status, Somali refugees only had temporary work permits, which presented another set of barrier to employment, as employers preferred candidates with long-term work permits. [2] [9]

The fact that racialized immigrants and refugees generally have fewer opportunities in accessing non-precarious full-time employment has been well-documented. [16] The Somali community in Canada faced a number of barriers—including intersectional discrimination—to access non-precarious full-time employment. Women were and still are among the most vulnerable; being Black, Muslim, and Women, they face discrimination based on race, religion, and gender. [12] Somali male youth, also face significant barriers, as reported in a study entitled *Cashberta* which

[1] Adults between the ages of 25-54 years were considered.

analyzed the trajectories of those who migrated in Alberta searching for employment, but ended up dead. [15]

In terms of unemployment, case studies indicated that 60% of Somali refugees in Ottawa in 1999 and 65% in Toronto in 1995 were unemployed. [2] More recent 2006 Census data show that the unemployment rate for adult Somali-Canadians in general was much lower at 16.4% (compared with 5.4% in the total adult population), which was still three times the rate for the total population. Again, adult Somali women had a much higher unemployment rate at 21.5%. Moreover, 57% of Somali-Canadians lived below the Low-Income Cut-Off in 2005 (compared to just 11% for the total population), making them one of the most disadvantaged groups. [5]

4. Triumphs

The story of Somalis is not only one of discrimination and settlement challenges, but one of resilience as well. In the face of the many systemic challenges mentioned above, multiple service agencies targeting Somali communities have been established over the years. Whether these were pre-existing agencies doing outreach in Somali communities or those established by Somali community members themselves, they provided accessible settlement services for the community and created employment. Despite the defunding of some of these ethno-community organizations by the Conservative government in 2011-2012, a sense of resilience prevails as many still continue to serve their communities, albeit at much reduced capacity. [17] Indeed, some Somali community organization leaders, such as Bashir Ahmed (from the Somali Canadian Education and Rural Development Organization in Edmonton) have been recognized for their outstanding achievements and received multiple awards. [18]

Self-help initiatives have had their fair share of success as well. They served to empower local community members and some managed to recreate the social support system from back home. And in the process, they managed to bring some important policy changes that benefited other refugees and immigrants as well. As mentioned in the previous section, the government agreed to the settlement of the Charter challenge on the *Immigration Act* amendments, which repealed the ID requirements that discriminated against refugee claimants from certain countries such as Afghanistan. A group of Somali women in Toronto also launched a lawsuit against the Housing Authority in 1991 arguing that it discriminated against refugee claimants. The law was subsequently changed and entitled all refugee claimants to access subsidized housing. [12]

More recently in 2012, Somali parents came together to force the Toronto District School Board to improve learning outcomes for Somali-speaking children. A study was commissioned by the TDSB and its recommendations for developing new teaching strategies and expanding homework support and mentorship programs were adopted by the Board. [14] Another crucial issue to remember is the leadership taken by the Somali community in the conversation on

preventing youth radicalism and radical Islam. Community organizations need to be supported by government to continue this important work. [19]

Last October, Honorable Ahmed Hussen—a former refugee from Somalia—became the first Somali-born Canadian elected to the House of Commons. [20] [21] This marks another triumph for the Somali community in Canada, and signals that the successful integration of Somali refugees in Canada is well underway.

To finish, the story of Somali resettlement should not be erased from the national narrative of Canada's proud resettlement history; instead, it is a story that must be told, re-told, and documented in history in order to learn from both past successes and mistakes, and to further improve the (re)settlement of refugees to Canada today and in the future.

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