

**8th Annual Conference of the / 8ème Conférence annuelle de l'
Canadian Association for Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (CARFMS)
Association Canadienne des Études sur les Réfugiés et la Migration Forcée
(ACERMF)**

**Special Plenary Session on “Fostering the Belonging of Migrants in Canada”
Friday May 15, 2015**

**Presentation by Debbie Douglas
Executive Director, OCASI**

Mutaz Elmardy, a Sudanese refugee, was walking home from evening prayers at a mosque on a frigid January evening in 2011 when he was stopped and questioned by Toronto police. He was unarmed. He had been in Canada for six years. He was subject to ‘carding’, the insidious practice that in Toronto has resulted in widespread profiling, intimidation and abuse of primarily Black men.

Mr. Elmardy later filed a lawsuit against Toronto Police and the Police Services Board, and testified in court that the officer punched him twice in the face and kicked him several times before handcuffing him.

There was no videotape or audiotape and no witnesses – except other police officers. It was just his word against that of the police. The judge believed him, and earlier this week, awarded him \$27,000 in damages, and ruled that carding can be highly abusive.

Zunera Ishaq was scheduled to become a Canadian citizen last year. She came to Canada in 2008 and by 2013 had passed the citizenship test. All that remained was for her to take the citizenship oath.

But there was a problem, a Canadian problem.

In 2011, then-Immigration Minister Jason Kenney banned anyone from taking the citizenship oath with their face covered. To become a Canadian citizen, Ms. Ishaq would have to choose between Canada and her faith.

She took a different route, and in February 2015 Canada’s federal court struck down the ban.

The federal government appealed the decision, even though it seems likely that it will lose the appeal.

If this was a question of imposing a particular kind of dress code for the citizenship ceremony, the government could have simply changed the regulations that govern citizenship oath-taking.

A National Post story¹ has speculated that even though it knows it will lose the case, the government may be holding out for political gain by putting the Niqab question at the centre of our upcoming federal election later this year – because we know more than likely, that the election will happen before the appeal is decided. The government may be hoping that enough voters will see its repudiation of the Niqab as part of its larger campaign against terrorism.

It seems those tactics are working.

A Forum Research poll in March of this year found that 67 per cent of respondents oppose allowing women to wear the face-covering Niqab during citizenship ceremonies. A total of over 1,300 Canadian adults took part in the survey.

Mr. Elmardy and Ms. Ishaq's experience are symptomatic of a deep, pervasive and persistent 'othering' of certain Canadian residents – an exclusion that is rooted in Canada's history of colonialism and slavery.

This history is very much a part of our contemporary reality, and frames the 'settlement' and integration experience of refugees and immigrants to Canada. By the very act of 'settling' we are each complicit in Canada's ongoing colonial project, even as we occupy different spaces and locations of privilege and power, as we include and are included in that neo-liberal narrative.

For example carding by Toronto Police, the Niqab discussion, the discourse of who is a genuine refugee and therefore deserving of refuge in Canada; who is good enough to be selected for immigration through our new Express Entry program; who among temporary migrant workers is good enough to stay although apparently everyone is good to come to work – often at wages that are a pittance; and who is good enough to get Canadian citizenship – these are all the contemporary reproduction of power relations that were expressed in the exclusion of certain Canadian residents – from the exclusion through the head tax of Chinese railroad workers and migrants between 1872 - 1947; the exclusion of Sikh migrants on the Komagata Maru in 1914;

¹ <http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/richard-moon-the-government-is-sure-to-lose-its-appeal-in-the-citizenship-oath-niqab-case-maybe-thats-the-point>

and to the exclusion of certain refugees through the Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement from 29 December 2004 – and onto today where certain new Citizenship provisions are to come into effect by this June that will further restrict access to Citizenship.

We are well aware that certain residents are less desirable as Canadians and more likely to be excluded by new restrictions – such as racialized residents, those from non-English and non-French speaking countries, and refugees.

How do we equate these realities with Canada's self-perception of being tolerant, pro-immigrant, and multicultural? How do we reconcile the contradictions of a country that legalized gay marriage, and also racially profiled Maher Arar and sent him to be tortured in another country.

How do we even begin to understand what it means to belong, let alone answer the question, 'who belongs where? How? And belong to what?

Like 'integration', does 'belonging' mean a migrant is expected to fit into the norm? Knowing full well that the 'norm' in Canada often means a Euro-centric, Judeo-Christian, Hetero-normative, Cis-gendered and therefore exclusive of a significant proportion of those who are already here, and those wanting to come to Canada?

One of the ongoing discussions in the immigrant and refugee settlement sector - the sector that is explicitly funded and tasked with 'fostering belonging in migrants' – is how do we know when a migrant is settled and integrated? What are the indicators? And as some people would ask, 'what are we trying to integrate people into?'

These are questions that typically come up in the context of funding reports – peppered with the jargon of accountability, logic models, outcomes, and the latest – a settlement plan. We can all agree that migration is a fluid process, and that while there are systemic barriers the experience of settling is individual, often life-long and that some may never feel settled, and never feel that they belong.

Let's consider housing as an indicator – as we know that while a refugee or an immigrant has secured housing, that housing may not be stable; and even if it is stable the next economic downturn can result in job loss leading to homelessness – because as we saw in the recent recession immigrants were the first to lose their jobs, the last to be re-hired and many have still not regained the ground they lost.

Consider employment as an indicator – there are far too many studies that tell us that immigrants who arrived in the last decade are worse off in the labour market compared to those who arrived before – despite that fact that the newer arrivals have higher levels of education and skills. Immigrants in general are over-represented in precarious and low-wage employment, and racialized immigrants particularly racialized immigrant women - are the most affected.

Perhaps we should consider all of the Social Determinants of Health as a good starting point for indicators of well-being and inclusion – unless of course we care about just ticking off the box that says housing, or employment – and don't really want to consider what type of housing, what type of employment, and how racism and racial profiling can dramatically alter one's sense of 'belonging'.

Migration can be a difficult experience for many. In a study published earlier this week, researchers at the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) found that immigrants from the Caribbean and Bermuda, and refugees from East Africa and South Asia, have one and a half to two times higher risk of psychotic disorders compared to the general population of Ontario. They found that immigrants from Northern Europe, Southern Europe and East Asia have about half the risk of psychotic disorders compared to the general population.

One of the authors, Dr. Paul Kurdyak said, “The patterns we observe suggest that psychosocial factors associated with the migratory experience and integration into Canada may contribute to the risk of psychotic disorders”.

The study found that facts such as visible minority status, or what we prefer to call the experience of racialization, and socioeconomic condition can be factors for certain migrants.

The researchers conclude that given the rapid growth in the population of foreign-born Canadians - one of the highest rates of any Western nation - the mental health status of immigrants and refugees should be a national priority.

It is past time therefore that we have comprehensive and fully accessible healthcare for all migrants – talking about ways to increase belonging. And that for us means implementing the complete reversal of all the cuts to the Interim Federal Health for refugees; eliminating the three-month wait for healthcare in Ontario and British Columbia, and extending complete healthcare coverage for all migrant workers; and providing full access to healthcare for all residents without immigration status. This access to a critical public service I would argue is contributing to a sense of belonging.

Canada's immigration program – (a colonization program) - has always been about bringing people in to work – whether it was about working stolen land, or working in manufacturing or service, domestic work and now in IT, Finance and other high-skilled areas. It has also been about family reunification and later about meeting international humanitarian obligations.

But let's take a look at family and how it is defined. We know that family is central to creating community and a sense of belonging.

So we believe it is truly unfortunate as well as highly problematic that we have drifted so far from fulfilling the family reunification objectives of our immigration program. Measures like Conditional Permanent Residence for sponsored spouses, the inadmissibility provisions in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the restrictions that prevent migrant domestic workers and caregivers from bringing their families here while they work to qualify for permanent residence; the restrictions in sponsoring parents and grandparents; and the unfair and completely unfounded characterization of certain spousal sponsorship applications as marriage fraud; and the massive delays in processing family sponsorship applications – especially those from the Global South – all combine to tell us that while certain immigrants are welcome in Canada others are not; and that this country values labour above the person.

No society can be built on structures and systems that characterize humans as widgets and not people. We need laws and regulations that would make migration of the entire family commonplace, and not extraordinary; we need a definition of family that fits our reality and not an imagined norm.

A sense of belonging can only be built on a sense of shared ownership – a sense that every resident is a participant as well as an architect of our society.

Initiatives like access to voting rights – to participate in decision-making for the community in which one lives – are fair, and equitable and the right thing to do. We were delighted earlier this week when North Bay City Council in northern Ontario joined Toronto, Halifax and Saint John City Councils in supporting permanent resident franchise motions and writing to their respective Premiers to ask that voting laws be changed.

We hope that many more municipalities will follow suit, and that Canada will see permanent resident voting in the very next municipal election (October 2018 in Ontario).

A 2008 poll by the Association for Canadian Studies of 600 immigrants based in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver found that 87% of those surveyed expressed a “very strong” or “somewhat strong” sense of belonging. This poll was taken at a time when naturalization rates of immigrants often topped over 85%. But with all of the changes we have experienced in migration legislation and regulations over the last 8-9 years I would not be surprised if we see a downward trend of those numbers. We have seen an increasing demonization of refugees and asylum seekers. We have seen an increasing narrative of the ‘othering’ of those from minority faith communities particularly Muslims, and of racialized communities.

I would argue that it is up to us though – those of us who preach a progressive politics, to reverse these trends of anti-migrant sentiments. It is up to us to hold our elected and other civic leaders accountable. It is up to us to work on building a nation based on the principles of fairness and equity; on values defined by a human rights framework; to honour our treaty obligations with Indigenous peoples; and to fulfill our promise of an inclusive society that is the hope of every migrant who comes to our shores.