

# Aspirations for Higher Education among Newcomer Refugee Youth in Toronto: Expectations, Challenges, and Strategies

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## Abstract

*A large percentage of refugees have low levels of education and official language fluency upon arrival in Canada. This paper discusses educational goals of newcomer refugee youth from three communities in Toronto (Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese), and explores how these are linked to pre-migration and post-migration determinants. Guided by community-based research principles, we collaborated with eight refugee youth peer researchers and conducted ten focus groups and thirteen interviews with refugee youth. Results show that newcomer refugee youth develop strong aspirations for higher education in Canada as a proactive response to overcome pre-migration experiences of forced migration and educational disruptions. We then discuss how these youth negotiate educational goals in post-migration context in relation to shifts in family responsibilities and everyday encounter with multiple systemic barriers in Canada. In doing this, we examine the thin line between vulnerability and empowerment that refugee youth straddle and reveal policy gaps and contradictions in the depoliticized humanitarianism within refugee resettlement in Canada.*

## Résumé

*Un grand pourcentage de réfugiés a un faible niveau d'éducation et une faible connaissance des langues officielles à leur arrivée au Canada. Cet article présente les buts éducationnels des nouveaux jeunes réfugiés de trois communautés de Toronto (afghane, karen et soudanaise) et examine en quoi ceux-ci sont liés à des déterminants pré et postmigration. Suivant des principes de recherche communautaire, nous avons travaillé de concert avec huit jeunes chercheurs de ces communautés, avons tenu dix groupes de discussion et réalisé treize entrevues avec des*

*réfugiés. Les résultats montrent que les nouveaux jeunes réfugiés aspirent fortement à une éducation supérieure au Canada en tant que réponse proactive aux expériences prémigration d'un déplacement forcé et aux interruptions dans leur éducation. Nous examinons ensuite les façons dont les jeunes concilient leurs buts éducationnels dans un contexte postmigration par rapport aux changements dans les responsabilités familiales et aux obstacles systémiques au Canada qui font partie de leur quotidien. Ce faisant, nous étudions la mince ligne entre la vulnérabilité et l'autonomisation que chevauchent ces jeunes et mettons au jour les manques dans les politiques et les contradictions dans l'humanitarisme dépolitisé de la réinstallation des réfugiés au Canada.*

## Introduction

With the enactment of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) in 2002, Canada made firm commitments to sponsor refugees primarily on humanitarian grounds and removed restrictions on “admissibility” criteria based on medical, economic, educational, and language proficiency that are usually applied to economic immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) indicate that a large and growing percentage of refugees upon arrival in Canada have less than high school level education and no English or French language ability. Arrival data from 2000 to 2009 indicate that on average, refugees fifteen years and older are four times more likely than economic immigrants (32.3 per cent vs. 8.43 per cent) to have had nine years or less of schooling.<sup>2</sup> Since 2005, the percent of refugees fifteen years and older with nine years or less of schooling has been steadily increasing from 27.7 per cent in 2005 to 38.3 per cent in 2009. Similarly, the percent of refugees with no English or French language ability upon arrival in Canada increased from 32.6 per cent

in 2005 to 44.4 per cent in 2009. In comparison, only 21.1 per cent of economic immigrants in 2009 had no English or French language ability upon arrival in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

Yet literature on educational experiences of refugees is sparse. In Canada, evidence on educational pathways for refugees is particularly thin because the education sector does not collect or consider data about pre-migration experiences or arrival immigration status. Instead, sector level data on educational experiences tend to lump refugees into a single category of “foreign-born” or “immigrants.”<sup>4</sup> There is a pressing research and policy need in Canada to better understand and overcome post-migration educational gaps and challenges that refugees face. Based on a community-based research project with refugee youth from three communities in Toronto, this article discusses the educational aspirations of newcomer refugee youth in Canada and examines how these aspirations for higher education are shaped/negatively influenced by pre-migration and post-migration factors. We situate our analysis within critical discussions about the intersection between ethical and political dimensions in humanitarian refugee policies.

### ***Current Knowledge on Refugees and Education***

Access to primary education is widely recognized as a universal right by most nations as mandated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>5</sup> In many nations, this right to education encompasses post-primary levels as well. However, this fundamental right to education is often not extended to refugees. Successive reports by the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies over the last two decades indicate that refugees and displaced people often experience multiple barriers and disruptions in education.<sup>6</sup> A recent report by UNESCO on armed conflict and education reported that over twenty-eight million children of primary school age are out of school in conflict-affected countries, accounting for almost 42 per cent of the population of children worldwide. In refugee camps in 2008, almost 69 per cent of children aged six to eleven years were attending primary school, while only 30 per cent of children aged twelve to seventeen years were attending secondary school.<sup>7</sup> School closures and drop-out rates tend to be very high in conflict-affected areas. Only 65 per cent of children in conflict-affected low-income countries completed the last grade of school, compared to 86 per cent of children in low-income countries not affected by conflict.<sup>8</sup> In Afghanistan, school-aged children lost on average 5.5 years of schooling during times of conflict from 1978 to 2001.<sup>9</sup> There is little mention in these reports about tertiary education, which suggests that tertiary education for refugees remains a very low global priority.<sup>10</sup> In 2003, UNHCR reported that

tertiary and vocational level programs accounted for only 3 per cent of all UNHCR supported education programs.<sup>11</sup>

Graca Machel’s landmark report *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* released in 1996 underscored that access to quality education is “essential,” and not secondary, to promoting welfare and peace during armed conflict and forced migration contexts. Since this report, a number of international initiatives have been mobilized in this direction.<sup>12</sup> For example, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies was established in 2000 to ensure that nations meet minimum standards of education in emergency and conflict situations. Between 2006 and 2008, humanitarian funding for education doubled from \$122 million to \$235 million.<sup>13</sup> Some progress has been made in a number of conflict-affected countries to rebuild schools and get children back to school. For example, the Go-to-School Initiative in Sudan has succeeded in bringing 1.6 millions children back to school. However, education continues to receive less than 4 per cent of total humanitarian funding in war-torn nations and is often the first area to be rolled back during budget cuts.<sup>14</sup>

There is now a wealth of literature on the experiences and impacts of forced migration and protracted refugee situations. Studies have documented that refugee youth and their families have often witnessed various types of violence,<sup>15</sup> witnessed the death of family members,<sup>16</sup> and might have lived in refugee camps with deplorable living conditions and minimal services and rights.<sup>17</sup> Members of refugee families may have experienced a fracturing of social order, which may be reflected in a collapse of ordered relationships within families.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, military forces may have actively promoted intergenerational mistrust and conflict as part of their assault on refugee communities.<sup>19</sup> Many studies have examined the relationship between pre-migration trauma and mental health among refugee families. Some of the psychosocial consequences reported in refugee children and youth include sleep disturbance;<sup>20</sup> aggression, regressive behavior, bed-wetting, and nail-biting;<sup>21</sup> violent self-harm;<sup>22</sup> sadness, introversion, and tiredness;<sup>23</sup> suicidal ideation and attempted suicide;<sup>24</sup> and post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders.<sup>25</sup>

However, evidence on the relationship between forced migration and educational experiences of refugees is thin, particularly in the context of resettlement nations in the Global North. Most of the studies are from the UK and Australia. The existing literature reveals the following relationships: (1) pre-migration educational disruptions and traumatic experiences faced by refugees can have serious and prolonged impacts on their educational experiences in the post-migration context;<sup>26</sup> (2) policy and programmatic support in resettlement countries geared at enabling

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics for youth in focus groups**

Group	N	Mean years in Canada	Status Upon Arrival: S/G/W/R*	Living with family	Understand English "very well"	Employed	Currently a student	Student at High School/ University/ ESL/ College**
<b>Afghan</b>								
16–19 F	7	2.4	4/3/0/0	7	3	2	5	5/0/1/0
16–19 M	5	1.0	1/2/0/2	3	4	0	5	5/0/0/0
20–24 F	6	2.5	3/2/0/0	5	3	0	3	0/0/3/1
20–24M	6	0.5	0/2/0/1	2	1	1	4	1/1/3/1
<b>Karen</b>								
16–19 F	6	2.5	1/5/0/0	5	0	2	6	6/0/0/0
16–19 M	7	1.8	0/7/0/0	6	0	3	4	5/0/1/0
20–24 F	5	2.0	0/4/0/1	4	0	2	5	2/0/3/0
20–24M	5	1.2	0/4/0/1	4	0	3	2	0/0/4/0
<b>Sudanese</b>								
20–24 F	4	2.3	1/2/0/1	4	3	2	4	0/3/0/1
20–24M	6	2.8	0/0/3/1	2	4	3	6	0/6/0/0

\*S = Private Sponsorship/ G=Government Assisted Refugee/ W=World University Service of Canada Sponsorship/ R=Refugee Claimant; one youth reported "other;" 4 did not respond.

\*\* Some youth reported more than one place of current education

refugees to overcome pre-migration educational disruptions has largely been missing or ineffective;<sup>27</sup> (3) other post-migration determinants such as poverty, linguistic barriers, prolonged or retraumatizing refugee status determination processes (for refugee claimants), and discrimination have important implications on educational access and outcomes for refugees;<sup>28</sup> and (5) in turn, educational experiences in post-migration contexts have critical impacts on the resettlement process and overall well-being for refugee immigrants.<sup>29</sup>

This study adds to this small but growing body of evidence. Findings from our study provide new insights about educational aspirations of refugee youth between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four who arrived in Canada within the last five years, the challenges they face as they navigate secondary and tertiary education, and the strategies they utilize to address these challenges.

### **Study Objective and Method**

In 2008, we brought together a multi-disciplinary team of academic partners, community agency partners, and eight refugee youth peer researchers in Toronto and established a community-based research team to spearhead the Refugee Youth Health Project. Peer researchers for the study

included youth from Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese communities with lived experience as refugees. Peer researchers received three months of training in research. The research team then used a collaborative research design process to develop research questions for the project, with peer researchers leading as subject matter experts. Peer researchers were also actively involved in all phases including data collection, analysis, and writing (including the writing of this article).

The research team collaboratively defined its first phase of the research project as focusing on changes in roles and responsibilities for refugee youth within the first five years of their arrival in Canada, how these changes affect youth, and what services are needed to support these changes as part of their resettlement in Canada. Within this broader lens of shifts in roles and responsibilities after coming to Canada, we sought to examine changes in educational aspirations and responsibilities for newcomer refugee youth.

Afghanistan, Burma (Karen refugees), and Sudan were selected for the study as these three countries have ranked within the top ten source countries for sponsored Convention refugees to Canada since 2006. Refugees from these countries have unique resettlement histories in Canada. All three

groups have been facing protracted wars resulting in a large number of people being killed or displaced. UNHCR estimates that almost 2,166,149 Afghan refugees remain outside of Afghanistan, despite more than five million returning to the country since 2002. Additionally, worldwide there are 693,632 refugees from Sudan and roughly 164,864 refugees from Burma.<sup>30</sup> Afghanistan has been a key source country for refugees to Canada from the mid-1990s onwards. From 2000 to 2009, Canada received about 25,500 people from Afghanistan. Within this same period, roughly 10,100 people from Sudan have resettled in Canada.<sup>31</sup> Canada has only recently begun resettling Karen refugees; since 2000, about 3,100 Karen refugees have resettled in Canada, the majority of whom have arrived since 2007.<sup>32</sup>

Following ethics approval, participants were recruited using a number of broad and targeted strategies. Potential participants were youth aged sixteen to twenty-four who self-identified as belonging to one of the three communities of interest, and had come to Canada within the last five years as sponsored Convention refugees or through the in-Canada refugee claimant process. We conducted ten gender-specific and age-specific focus groups per community.<sup>33</sup> Each focus group included four to seven participants ( $n = 57$ ) and was facilitated by two peer researchers (of the same gender and cultural group as the focus group participants).

Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic information of the focus group study participants. Youth in the focus groups had been in Canada less than two years, on average ( $M = 1.9$ ). The majority came as Government Assisted Refugees (31 out of 57). Almost all of the females (25 out of 28) and more than half of the males (17 out of 29) were living with family members. Strikingly, none of the Karen youth reported that they understood English “very well” whereas approximately half of the other youth did (18 out of 34). Almost half of the youth were currently employed. The majority of the youth were currently students (44 out of 57). Most of the younger Afghan and Karen youth were in high school (21 out of 25). Among the older youth aged twenty to twenty-four, only three Afghan youth and none of the Karen youth were in university or college, whereas all of the Sudanese youth were either in university or college, a fact that is consistent with the high proportion of Sudanese youth who had come to Canada under the World University Service (WUSC) program. We also conducted thirteen one-on-one interviews<sup>34</sup> to explore in more detail issues raised in the focus groups.

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the culturally specific language that is commonly spoken within the respective groups (Dari for Afghan focus groups and Sgaw for Karen focus groups) except in the case

of Sudanese participants, who participated in English.<sup>35</sup> The team also held three meetings to develop solutions on how to make the data collection instruments youth-friendly and culturally sensitive including addressing any translation issues. For example, we dedicated a half-day meeting to explore how “coping” would be communicated in the three communities in a consistent and culturally meaningful way. Peer researchers provided valuable insights on refugee-friendly framing of questions including using “first language” instead of “mother tongue” or highlighting that “country of origin” may be difficult or irrelevant for refugees to identify.

The interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and, where necessary, translated into English by professional translators and validated by peer researchers. Discrepancies in translations between professional translators and peer researchers were promptly addressed through open communication between relevant stakeholders. In cases where discrepancies could not be resolved, we relied on the translation of peer researchers because of their more intimate knowledge about the research. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis<sup>36</sup> by reading and coding transcripts sentence by sentence in NVivo (version 9) qualitative data analysis software, based on a coding framework that was collaboratively developed by the research team.<sup>37</sup>

Quotes are identified by which ethnocultural group participants belong to (A: Afghan; K: Karen; S: Sudanese) and whether participants are male (M) or female (F) and the age group (16–19 or 20–24).

### ***Educational Aspirations of Refugee Youth***

Participants from all focus groups passionately emphasized how their educational aspirations have strengthened considerably after coming to Canada and indicated that studying was the most important of their responsibilities here. The following quotes capture the expanded importance that refugee youth attribute to education since coming to Canada:

In this country, going to school is very important to me, and as my friends said, we must have big dreams to come true. Also I help my brothers and sisters with their lessons and schooling. —AM 16–19

I think it is education. After we came here the most important thing is education. This is my personal view. —KM 20–24

After three months in Canada, going to school has become the most important thing for me. —SM 20–24

Closer analysis of the study results reveal that the strengthening of educational aspirations among newcomer refugee youth in Canada appears to be a proactive response to the pre-migration educational disruptions and limited opportunities encountered within their lives in war-torn countries or refugee camps. Many participants articulated their high educational goals in Canada and their potential benefits by contrasting them with the lack of access to good quality education, opportunities, and rights in their war-torn home country or refugee camps. While discussing why education is “very important,” one Karen participant recounted how the Thai government enforced multiple restrictions on Karen refugee camps including preventing schools from being built in the camps.

When we were in refugee camp, we were being oppressed on all side by the government. As we were refugees they gave us less chances and rights. Why? This is because we were not their citizens and we had no right to travel on our own. You must only stay in the camp. Even in the camp sometimes you were being oppressed. And when some outsiders wanted to come and teach and give you education, they did not allow. They wanted to build a school for you, but they were not to do that for refugees. Our education opportunity was being suppressed also. —KM 20–24

As reflected in the quote above, refugee youth are acutely aware of the pre-migration political factors like war, forced migration, violence, acute poverty, and repressive policies against refugees that prevented them from having access to quality education. Similarly, an Afghan youth provided insightful political-economic explanations about how protracted war has resulted in poor quality of education in Afghanistan:

Where does this illiteracy come from? ... You cannot expect people to go to school in a country of war; I don't know how long we have had war, about 40 years, and there is no safety. People say “If we go to bed tonight, are we going to wake up alive tomorrow morning?” Then we shouldn't expect that society to have good teacher, good doctors. All are escaping, this is a true fact, these are all realities and we must accept them. —AF 20–24

Many participants from all focus groups highlighted that the higher quality of education in Canada (compared to back home or refugee camps) fosters learning, stronger educational motivation, and stronger hopes for the future. To quote one Karen youth:

The schools here are not like schools there. Schools here you can learn many things ... When I was there I went to school just for the name. I did not try hard. As soon as I am in Canada, I am very

keen in learning, and very happy in school, and see many new things and I am improving a lot ... My concentration is growing better in my study. I have hope and high aim for my future. —KM 16–19

Some youth had high expectations that after completing school in Canada they would make a good salary and use their income and knowledge to help others:

When you study and become somebody in the future, you can be helpful to yourself and to your community. For example, there are lots of Afghan people here, and you can help them ... not only Afghan community but all the communities. You can help through your knowledge or your field. I think the most important thing is education and schooling. —AM 16–19

The change in educational aspirations before and after coming to Canada is also linked to the perceived differences in the value and benefits associated with education between the two contexts. In direct contrast to pre-migration contexts, many participants perceived that education carries greater value in Canada and is an essential requirement for getting a good job. As one Afghan youth put it:

I think in Afghanistan education plays a minor role in the society because for many occupations, you don't need to be educated ... But in Canada you cannot find a good job, unless you are educated and have a good education background. Of course you can do any types of jobs, but with little and low income. —AF 20–24

In explaining low educational expectations in pre-migration contexts, Karen participants shared an old Karen proverb (“literate eat rice, illiterate eat rice”) which symbolically means that whether you are educated or not, you end up getting the same type of job. They then contrasted the situation in Canada where not having higher education can make it extremely difficult to get a job. The following quote from an older Karen participant (several of whom arrived in Canada without having completed high school) captures the reality of this harsh transition:

When we were there in our country situation was not like here. For a hard labour job you could apply for it without any education. A person with 10th grade education (high school education) and another without it can get the same type of manual labour job. If you were a good man it will be fine, but it is impossible here. Whenever you apply for a job you are asked to submit your qualification high school certificate, which we unfortunately do not have. So we cannot get a job. It is not easy. We become *Kyaw Thu Taw* [a person who is unfortunate in anything he tries to do]. —KM 20–24

In summary, many newly arrived refugee youth in our study indicated that their educational aspirations became stronger after coming to Canada. We found that this increase in educational aspirations is a response to a number of factors related to perceived and real differences between educational systems in Canada compared to the war-torn home countries or refugee camps. These include (1) lack of quality education or access barriers to quality education in their pre-migration contexts; (2) positive experiences of learning provided by Canadian educational institutions (compared to before Canada); and (3) expectations and realization that a Canadian education can lead to good jobs and a better future, including being able to make a good income and help family and community with the income and knowledge gained. Moreover, participant narratives also highlight that refugee youth have a critical understanding of the political factors that have undermined educational opportunities in war-torn countries and refugee camps.

### ***Challenges and Barriers to Education in Canada for Refugee Youth***

The study results also reveal that newcomer refugee youth in Canada are pressed to negotiate their educational aspirations against multiple post-migration challenges and barriers. These challenges and barriers are experienced at both the family and systemic level.

#### ***Balancing Educational Goals with Family Level Responsibilities***

One key finding in this study is that refugee youth experience a considerable increase in family responsibilities following migration to Canada. A lower level of education, lower official language fluency, and poor health among parents and other family members contribute to increased responsibilities for refugee youth, as youth often find themselves having to become interpreters, service navigators, and caretakers for their families:

In my particular case, when my father came here, he doesn't know English and neither does my mother. Before when we were in another county, my father knew their language, and he was almost responsible for everything. But here, because I and my brother know English more and better than my father, then our responsibility increases as well. We have to take our grandmother and our father to doctors' appointments and also solve the problems at home. Here the responsibilities fall more on the children because they learn English much faster. —AF 16–19

In particular, youth spoke sadly about the ongoing difficulties that their parents face in getting jobs in Canada, even for those who do have good education and English-language

fluency. In many cases, youth then have to step up and enter the labour market to support their families.

Back home you tend to rely on your parents. You don't have to think about your financials. Just school work. But here you are not going to base everything on your parents because no matter how educated your parents are there are no good jobs here compared to how they used to work back home ... Here they have to struggle on their own so we are not going to sit back and rely on them. So there is more responsibility here than ever compared to back home. —SF 20–24

Some youth spoke of role reversal in terms of youth having to take adult roles including becoming key breadwinners for their families. This was particularly common among families in which one or more of the parents were not in Canada.

Juggling these new and multiple family responsibilities in Canada can be “overwhelming” for refugee youth and can “overshadow” their educational aspirations and responsibilities. As one participant put it:

When I came to Canada, my responsibilities changed a lot because I just came with my family, my dad couldn't come with us, so I had to be responsible ... I was the eldest ... there were more responsibilities on me ... I'm overwhelmed with so many responsibilities like lots of paperwork. [School is] definitely a priority but it gets overshadowed with all the different responsibilities. —SM 20–24

While increased family responsibilities for youth are a common process that comes with growing older, the intensity and difficult context through which newcomer refugee youth are being pressed to take on multiple family responsibilities is of concern here. Studies have documented that immigrant youth in general undergo salient post-migration shifts in family responsibilities after coming to Canada.<sup>38</sup> In comparing our evidence on refugee youth with other immigrant youth, however, we notice that refugee youth experience these shifts in more acute ways because of the many additional disadvantages and vulnerabilities associated with experiences of forced migration noted earlier.

There is an inherent tension in refugee youths' aspirations to achieve higher education in order to get better jobs and thus be better able to take care of their families and the need to provide for their family's needs immediately. The immediate needs overshadow the long-term goals and widen the gap between aspirations and accomplishment, while simultaneously intensifying the youths' aspirations as they see higher education as the way to improve their situation.

### *Systemic Barriers and Discrimination in Education*

Refugee youth face numerous systemic barriers in pursuing their educational goals in Canada including (1) information barriers; (2) non-recognition of “foreign” educational credentials and inaccurate academic placement; (3) linguistic barriers; (4) financial barriers; and (5) discrimination. These challenges and barriers can have serious negative consequences on the educational aspirations and performance of refugee youth.

### *Information barriers*

Many youth from all of the focus groups mentioned the difficulties they faced in getting information and guidance about the Canadian education system and how this led to confusion and misdirection in their educational path. For example, one youth shared the following about not having any idea about post-secondary education after finishing grade 12:

I had a big problem, but no one helped me with that ... When I came here as a newcomer, I took an exam and I was accepted in grade 10. I kept studying up to grade 12. But, I had no idea where to study after grade 12. While I was studying at high school, they didn't give me any information where I could go after graduation. —AF 20–24

As captured in the above quote, youth stated that they would have taken a different educational track and progressed much further if they had not faced information barriers about the education system. Many refugee youth emphasized the need for timely orientation and guidance for newcomer youth particularly as the education system in Canada is very different from back home, and that adjustment can be quite difficult and “shocking” (as one youth put it). While this is a common experience for immigrant youth in general,<sup>39</sup> refugee youth with disrupted education and low official language fluency are not just more likely to face information barriers but also may not know who to go to for help in overcoming these information barriers.

### *Non-recognition of “foreign” education and inaccurate academic placement*

Several youth criticized how their previous educational level/capacity was not properly recognized in Canada. Some mentioned that they were misplaced in what they perceived to be an inaccurate grade or academic stream, and that information gaps about the educational system prevented them from realizing this before it was too late.

In 2006 when I came to Canada, I didn't know about the education system here, I didn't know that if you take applied you go to

college or if you take academic you go to university. If I would have known, I would be done school by now. They just gave me applied and ESL [English as Second Language] classes, and they were very easy for me. Now I found out that I could have started from grade 10 at high school and studied for higher education. Now I am taking summer school courses like regular science and English, but it has been 2 or 3 years since I've been going to school here and that I've been taking ESL, applied courses that I already knew and were easy for me. No one explained to me the reality of the system properly and what there is and what to take. —SF 20–24

Youth also highlighted the need for a more sensitive and flexible system for assessing diplomas and degrees from back home, including being able to accommodate the fact that some refugee youth may not have copies of their educational certificates with them, may have lost these certificates due to forced/multiple migrations, and may not be able to get additional copies of their previous educational certificates from war-torn countries.

Most of the youth were acutely aware of how non-Canadian degrees are not respected or valued in Canada within the education sector and in the labour market. Youth sadly recalled negative impacts of this on themselves, their parents, and immigrant communities in general.

They don't think you have the capability to do something ... in terms of education. If you got an education back in Africa and you come here they don't respect it as much. —SF 20–24

### *Linguistic barriers*

Refugee youth, particularly from the Afghan and Karen communities, identified linguistic barriers as a key challenge in pursuing educational goals. Participants emphasized that low fluency in English made it difficult to understand what is being taught in class, limited their ability to ask questions or seek clarification from teachers, and to communicate with others. This in turn resulted in youth falling behind in classes and limiting their overall interactions in school.

School is a struggle and that relates to the language barrier because I want to ask questions for the teacher to clarify but I couldn't communicate that. So then it makes me fall behind. —KM 16–19

Linguistic barriers have been documented to be a major hurdle for immigrant youth in general.<sup>40</sup> However, as noted earlier, compared to other immigrant groups, refugee youth and their families are twice as more likely to have limited or no official language fluency and thus may face more severe linguistic barriers, with serious negative impacts on their education.

Others talked about how low fluency in English among parents combined with exhaustion due to lengthy work hours hindered parental support and mentoring in their children's education.

Among young children, like the Karen newcomer kids because their parents work whole days and they come back and they are exhausted, they have no time to spend with their children to do their homework and also even if they have time they don't have the language skill, they don't know how to help them, so children lack support in terms of completing their homework. —KM 16–19

Here again, relative to other newcomer youth, parental support and mentoring in education may be very limited for refugee youth whose parents may have low education levels and who are more likely to have been orphaned, come to Canada unaccompanied, been separated from parents for extended periods due to forced migration.

### *Financial barriers*

Youth also highlighted financial barriers to pursuing education, particularly when it comes to tertiary education. Several youth noted that the resettlement assistance or social assistance they receive from the government is very limited and is not even enough to cover basic expenses. Government Assisted Refugees in Canada receive financial support through the Resettlement Assistance Program for up to one year after arrival; the amount of support varies by a number of factors including family size and special needs. Following this period, refugees who are not able to find jobs can apply for social assistance. Refugee claimants are also eligible for social assistance. While economic immigrants do not receive financial support from the government during the initial years of resettlement, they are more likely than refugees to have arrived in Canada with some financial assets and can find jobs more readily.

A few older youth participants in the study talked about having to quit school since the social assistance they receive is not adequate to cover their household expenses:

We have three siblings attending high school and we get only \$800 which is not enough. We have decided to quit school and search for job. —KF 20–24

In contrast, other youth noted that school and homework leave no time to work and thus they prefer to be on social assistance while in school. Older youth (in the 18–24 year group) discussed at length the high cost of post-secondary education and their hesitation to take large student loans. When asked about what is needed, one youth emphatically called for “free education” so that youth do not have to

depend on government loans or welfare or to drop out for a semester due to financial difficulties:

I just request for one thing. Free education. Once you have all that money and you go to school and finish your school you don't tend to rely on the government anymore for welfare or none of these. Now we try hard and still do go to school and struggle, but you had to drop out for a semester to work and go back. If you have free education that would be very helpful. —SF 20–24

More affordable post-secondary education would of course benefit all low-income youth and not just refugee youth.

### *Discrimination*

Several refugee youth spoke about discrimination they have faced in schools from teachers and school administrators. One Sudanese youth sadly recalled a very direct experience of discrimination from a teacher:

That is what I am saying double disadvantage. First you are refugee second you are black and third you are female. You have so many things pushing you down ... I went to [name of school]. I was a gifted student in biology and chemistry. I came with my timetable because I transferred from one school to this other school and the teacher was saying are you sure you are not in the wrong classroom? Just because they assume you are black you know nothing. She was like Miss, really, I don't know your background but this is gifted, it is very hard. Do you know what you are getting yourself into and all this kind of stuff. Really? —SF 20–24

As exemplified by the above quote, youth reflected on experiences of discrimination from a critical intersectional perspective that linked discrimination to negative stereotypes that teachers or administrators may hold about racialized groups, particularly if they are women of colour and refugees. Some youth also mentioned about how they had experienced discrimination from other students while in school and were not able to do anything about it and so “suffered quietly.”

Youth also shared about upsetting expressions of discrimination and prejudice experienced at the community and systemic levels:

I see that they say that most of Afghans are terrorists, and they have come from a country of war for 20–22 years; they are not good people, they have different reasons and excuses. This is why the youth are so down and humiliated. They can't make progress. Me personally, I never say that I am from Afghanistan, because it won't work if I get a job, and people backstab me. —AF 20–24



The study results highlight that experiences of discrimination in and out of school can have adverse impacts on youths' sense of identity and well-being and can make schools an alienating and even unsafe space. As one youth put it, "discrimination is the main problem that prevents me to achieve our role, to achieve my goal." Responses to experiences of discrimination involved either "suffering quietly," passing, or even denying one's identity. Although many of these experiences the youth described happened in high schools, they can stand in the way of youth achieving the grades needed to attend universities and, as in the instance of youth being directed to the "applied stream," can actively prevent them from being eligible to apply to particular post-secondary institutions. Several younger participants hoped that they don't face similar discrimination when they enter university or college.

Findings from this study echo other studies that have documented the multiple challenges that refugee youth face in the educational system.<sup>41</sup> A study conducted by Yau with 135 refugee students in Toronto in 1995 found that an information and guidance gap is a common barrier encountered in the Canadian school system, in addition to inaccurate academic placement and academic streaming;<sup>42</sup> the fact that these barriers continue to exist even fifteen years after Yau's study represents a major lapse in policy. Other studies have found that experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment from fellow students and teachers are prevalent experiences faced by refugee youth.<sup>43</sup> Steele,<sup>44</sup> Portes and Rumbaut,<sup>45</sup> McBrien,<sup>46</sup> Kao and Thompson,<sup>47</sup> and Dlamini, Wolfe, Anucha, and Chungyan<sup>48</sup> have discussed the detrimental impacts of discrimination on academic performance, youth identity, and overall well-being. While non-refugee immigrant youth may face similar post-migration barriers to education, it is important to recognize the dissimilar and more severe encounter and outcomes from these barriers for refugee youth due to their experiences of forced migration and trauma.

### **Youth Strategies in Education**

We found that refugee youth utilize a range of strategies to pursue their educational goals in Canada, to address barriers to education, and to "get out of that cycle of going downward." Strategies include seeking help and support from friends, seeking help from education-focused newcomer services, not hesitating to ask questions from all available sources, and being prepared to question authority about their bad decisions. Being persistent in seeking help was an important strategy for some youth. One youth highlighted how she would "constantly go to the writing centre, talk to my TA [Teaching Assistant]." Another mentioned:

Never take no for an answer, especially in schools. Where you have guidance counselors who want to put you in certain courses [just] because you are immigrant. It just doesn't work like that.  
—SM 20–24

For many youth, friends are the main and often only source of support and advice. Several youth said that they get "a lot of help from friends." Moreover, older youth appear to draw on their educational experience, often negative ones, to take an active role in guiding younger siblings in terms of academic planning. This process includes reminding younger siblings that they need to decide for themselves and not necessarily depend on guidance from school:

Now my sister is in grade 11, and she is thinking like me, she is waiting for her school to help or guide her to choose her field. I told her "No, this is not the case, now in grade 11 you can decide what you want to study, and where to go." —AF 20–24

These strategies represent the resilience and tactical capabilities of refugee youth to confront hurdles. What is commendable is the proactive role youth are taking to support and mentor their friends and siblings through the education system in Canada. At the same time, "overwhelming" systemic inequalities and lack of supportive services appear to strain and undercut the capacity of youth for strategy and resilience.<sup>49</sup> Most youth in our study were clearly very distressed by the multiple barriers and negative experiences in pursuing their educational goals.

### **Discussion: Between Vulnerability and Empowerment**

Resettlement is a deeply transformative and political process for refugees and for the nations that resettle refugees. For refugees, it is usually an acutely conflicting process that can bring safety, security, freedom, legal rights, hope, and empowerment while at the same time accentuate their sense of loss, separation, tragedy, displacement, and marginalization. In resettlement nations, like Canada, an influx of refugees may be perceived as a collective humanitarian exercise while at the same time shunned for weakening national security, increasing public health concerns, and wasting taxpayer dollars. This ambivalence, or what Bhabha refers to as a Janus-like position,<sup>50</sup> in the refugee resettlement process is what results in contradictory policy and social outcomes that are humanitarian without being socially just, equitable, and empowering.

Canadian policy makers take pride in Canada's being one of the few nations with a "non-discriminatory" resettlement process for refugees. With IRPA, Canada has seen a rise in the number of refugees that may not necessarily have

a strong educational background, work qualifications, or good health. However, apart from an initial year of financial and settlement service support, other policy initiatives to build educational, professional, and political capacities among refugees are largely lacking. Such policy gaps can increase the risk of refugee immigrants being “assimilated into poverty” (see Portes and Zhou’s discussion of “segmented assimilation”).<sup>51</sup> Instead, the Canadian government continues to maintain misguided policies such as a lengthy refugee claimant application process, the current lack of an appeal process for unsuccessful refugee claimants,<sup>52</sup> “destining” of Government Assisted Refugees to different parts of Canada to meet quota needs rather than giving refugees choice of where to settle, and the requirement for Government Assisted Refugees to repay their transportation expenses for travelling to Canada; such policies serve to entrench rather than overcome the vulnerabilities that refugees face.

Crucially, these policy limitations and contradictions reflect a broader problem of the tenuous division between politics and ethics within humanitarianism. Drawing on the works of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben on the “biopolitics” of the way immigrants/refugees are treated, critical scholars like Peter Nyers,<sup>53</sup> Liisa Malkki,<sup>54</sup> Michalinos Zembylas,<sup>55</sup> and Didier Fassin<sup>56</sup> have exposed the flaws within mainstream humanitarian policies that result in “compassionate repression” of refugees such that refugees remain within the “state of exception” as “speechless emissaries.” These scholars argue that government bodies fail to recognize the political agency of refugees and continue to separate politics from the ethical dimensions of humanitarianism. This results in refugees being treated in dehumanizing or patronizing ways as “victims” and “helpless people” who just need “bare life” necessities to survive.

Depoliticized and minimalist humanitarianism embodied in the Canadian refugee resettlement program is what precludes policy makers from recognizing and proactively supporting the high educational aspirations among newcomer refugee youth and their families. Consequently, refugee youth tread a thin line between vulnerability and empowerment in pursuing their educational goals after coming to Canada. Our study findings show that refugee youth have intimate awareness of the immense potential of higher education in Canada to overcome their marginalization and yet are met with compounding systemic barriers and discriminations. Their struggle with vulnerability and empowerment is also experienced in the way that refugee youth have to juggle their expanded post-migration family responsibilities and educational goals. As captured in our study, expansion of family responsibilities for refugee youth

exemplifies the crucial leadership role that refugee youth are taking in helping their families resettle; refugee youth serve as “resettlement champions” for their families. At the same time, there is concern that refugee youth have little choice but to take on these family responsibilities at the expense of compromising their education. Research by Kanu,<sup>57</sup> McBrien,<sup>58</sup> Steven and Wilcot,<sup>59</sup> Yau,<sup>60</sup> and Wilkinson<sup>61</sup> also generated similar findings about the high educational goals among refugee youth and the numerous socio-political barriers that undermine not just their educational goals but their overall well-being.

Depoliticized humanitarianism in Canada is also reflected in the way that most researchers and policy makers continue to lump refugees together with immigrants which “obscures the effect of forced dislocation in the settlement experiences of refugees.”<sup>62</sup> Refugees thus continue to remain largely “invisible” within mainstream research and the policy domain. This is happening in spite of the wealth of evidence that, unlike for other immigrant groups, refugee experiences of forced migration, protracted refugee situations, and trauma have salient and long-term impacts on resettlement, education, health, access to services, and overall well-being. What is required instead is not to shy away from the politics of humanitarianism but to recognize it as an inherently political and deeply transformative process. In other words, we need to shift away from depoliticized and minimalist humanitarianism to transformative humanitarianism. In doing so, we can begin to recognize refugees as, in the words Peter Nyers, “positive, present, permanent, and authoritative citizens.” The indicators of successful refugee resettlement are not measured by quantitative figures like the number of “high needs” refugees that come to Canada or the amount of financial support refugees are given but by how closely policies are grounded in equity and social justice; policy makers need to recognize, and not ignore, the deeply political experiences of forced migration, trauma, and multiple vulnerabilities that refugees have undergone and be inspired and supportive of educational and other aspirations that refugee have in spite of these hardships.

Researchers and policy makers, particularly in the education sector, need to reverse the current practice of not collecting data on migration experience (or refugee status). This can be done by strengthening confidentiality in data collection/utilization process, by ensuring that there are no negative or stigmatizing political repercussions in disclosing information about migration process/status, and by demonstrating positive equity outcomes from collecting disaggregated data. Healthcare sector leaders in Canada have developed innovative solutions for collecting and utilizing data about migration experiences to deliver early and timely

healthcare services for refugees. For example, many health centres across Canada have formed successful partnerships with refugee reception centres and settlement agencies to provide exemplary models of care to refugees from the day they arrive in Canada. Stakeholders in the education sector can do the same.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this study indicate that refugee youth develop stronger aspirations for higher education after coming to Canada. While this represents a tremendous political opportunity, systemic barriers that undercut refugee youth educational aspirations in Canada are indicative of policy failures. More specifically, they represent contradictions and inherent tensions in Canada's refugee resettlement policies that claim to be humanitarian without being grounded in social justice and equity. There is urgent need to shift from depoliticized humanitarianism to transformative humanitarianism in which policy commitment to resettle refugees is buttressed by equitable and adequate supports. Policy solutions include substantial increase in funding for English/French language classes as well as for professional interpretation services. Educational information gaps and misplacements in inappropriate classes/streams needs to be resolved by building capacity (sector wise) of guidance counsellors and teachers to become more sensitive and responsive to the needs of refugee students. In particular, proactive mentoring from teachers and guidance counsellors is critical to enabling refugee students who have faced disruptions at the primary or secondary level to pursue higher education. Curriculum design and pedagogical approaches need to accommodate for learning barriers that refugees who have experienced educational disruptions and/or trauma may face. Overcoming discrimination in educational institutions needs to be prioritized and countered with comprehensive anti-oppression training at all levels. Financial barriers to education can be remedied through a number of targeted and broader policy interventions, including eliminating the transportation loan repayment requirement for sponsored refugees, making education more affordable, and removing barriers in the labour market. The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy currently being developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education makes no mention of how refugees are going to be "included" in this strategy; this needs to be reversed. Because refugees especially face barriers to post-secondary education, policy makers and educators working in tertiary education have a major responsibility to overcome these barriers by creating academic bridging programs (across educational institutions), targeted scholarships (such as the World University Service of Canada's scholarship program

for refugee youth), and other innovative and equity based strategies that can promote high educational aspirations among refugee youth and meet these aspirations.

Our positive experience of collaborating with refugee youth in conducting this study highlights that promoting educational inclusion and success for refugees needs to begin by involving refugees in leadership roles in research and in the policy development process.

### **NOTES**

1. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). "Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2009" (Ottawa: CIC, 2010), accessed 20 December, 2010, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/annual-report2009/index.asp>. Canada receives between 25,000 and 35,000 refugees every year; this represents about 10 to 12 per cent of the roughly 250,000 "permanent residents" who settle in Canada annually. On average, about 11,000 refugees come as "sponsored" refugees under the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement stream: 7,500 as Government Assisted Refugees (GARs) and 3,500 as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs). Roughly 12,000 to 19,000 come to Canada through the "In-Canada Asylum" stream in which people apply as refugee claimants upon entering Canada and then become "permanent residents" once their claim process is approved by a quasi-judiciary body called the Immigration and Refugee Board. The remaining 5,000 settle in Canada as family dependents of people who have come as refugees. From 2000 to 2009, about 280,000 refugees have settled in Canada of whom 62,000 (21 per cent) are youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.
2. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), "Facts and Figures, 2009: Immigration Overview," (Ottawa: CIC, 2010), accessed 20 December 2010, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2009/index.asp>
3. CIC, "Facts and Figures, 2009."
4. See, for example, the recent publication by R. Sweet, P. Anisef, R. Brown, D. Walters, and K. Phythian, "Post-High School Pathways of Immigrant Youth" (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010).
5. This UN Convention states that primary education should be compulsory and free; that different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, should be available and accessible; that educational and vocational information and guidance should be available and accessible to all children; and that measures should be taken to encourage regular attendance at schools to reduce drop-out rates (United Nations, 1989).
6. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "Education for All Global Monitoring Report: The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education" (UNESCO, 2011); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "2009 Global Trends: Refugees,

- Asylum-Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons” (UNHCR, 2010); UNHCR, “Learning for the Future: Refugee Education in Developing Countries” (UNHCR, 2009). See also Save the Children, “Last in Line, Last in School 2009: Donor trends in meeting education needs in countries affected by conflict and emergencies” (London: Save the Children, 2009).
7. The gravity of low enrolment rates of refugee children in school is underscored by UNHCR data that 45 per cent of refugees, internally displaced peoples, and asylum seekers are under the age of eighteen. In Chad, two-thirds of internally displaced people and 61 per cent of Sudanese refugees are under eighteen. UNHCR, “2009 Global Trends.”
  8. UNESCO, “Education for All Global Monitoring Report.”
  9. UNESCO, “Education for All Global Monitoring Report.”
  10. Apart from the UNHCR-administered Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund and the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) program, we were not able to find much information about tertiary education for refugees. For a passionate account of multiple barriers to higher education faced by Burmese refugees in Thailand, see Barbara Zeus, “Exploring Barriers to Higher Education in Protracted Refugee Situations: The Case of Burmese Refugees in Thailand,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 256–76. The Student Refugee Program run by World University Service of Canada represents one of the most innovative programs that connects resettlement and tertiary education of young refugees in Canada. Since its founding in 1978, WUSC has supported nine hundred refugees to resettle in Canada and pursue post-secondary education. According to a recent impact study, 97 per cent of WUSC-sponsored students have completed or are in the process of completing their tertiary education with an 85 per cent success rate among students in finding jobs in their field of study. The majority of these students also reported playing leadership roles in their communities in Canada and abroad.
  11. UNHCR, World Refugee Day 2003: Information Kit (Geneva: UNHCR, 2003)
  12. UN, Protecting the Right to Education (UN2007), accessed 8 January 2011, [http://www.un.org/children/conflict/machel/english/82-protecting-the-right-to-education.html#\\_note259](http://www.un.org/children/conflict/machel/english/82-protecting-the-right-to-education.html#_note259).
  13. Save the Children (SCF), “Education in Emergencies: Rewriting the Future,” Policy Brief (London: Save the Children, 2009).
  14. SCF, “Education in Emergencies: Rewriting the Future.” According to SCF, only five donor countries (Canada, Denmark, Japan, Norway, and Sweden) explicitly consider education to be an integral part of their humanitarian policy.
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  33. We planned to conduct four gender-specific and age-specific (16–19 years and 20–24 years) focus groups per community. In the end, however, only ten of the twelve focus groups were conducted; the focus groups with the younger Sudanese youth were not conducted because of recruitment challenges.
  34. Interviews were conducted with five Afghan youth (one female, age 16–19; two male, age 16–19; one female, age 20–24; one male, age 20–24), five Karen youth (two female, age 16–19; one male, age 16–19; two female, age 20–24) and three Sudanese youth (one male, age 16–19; two female, age 20–24). No additional demographic data were collected from interview participants.
  35. Our peer researchers from the Sudanese community advised the research team that conducting focus groups in English would not pose a barrier for most Sudanese youth in Toronto.
  36. A. Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
  37. All team members read one transcript together and one additional transcript independently to identify important themes for the coding framework. We then met several times as a team to review the significance of these themes across transcripts, resolve any disagreements, and then combine them to create a master coding framework for coding. A mid-point check in meeting was organized to review emergent themes during the coding process. Once the coding was completed we met as a team again to assess the breadth and depth of the coded data summaries and make decisions about analysis and writing. For example, we realized that coded data summary on direct experiences on discrimination were thinner than we originally expected. This prompted us to take a closer look at more systemic experiences of discrimination and exclusion during the analysis process. The team then broke up into sub groups based on thematic interests to analyze and write a series of articles (including this article) based on the coded data summaries. Peer researchers were involved in leadership roles through out this process.
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  42. Yau, “Refugee Students in Toronto Schools.”
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50. J. Bhabha, "Inconsistent State Intervention and Separated Child Asylum-Seekers," *European Journal of Migration and Law* 3, no. 3/4 (2001): 283–315.
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58. McBrien, "Refugee Students in the United States."
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61. Wilkinson, "Factors Influencing the Academic Success of Refugee Youth in Canada"
62. K. K. Kumsa, "'No, I'm Not a Refugee!' The Poetics of Belonging among Young Oromos in Toronto," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 2 (2006): 230–55.

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