

# “WAITING FOR A WIFE”: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGES AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF REFUGEE “INTEGRATION”

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## **Abstract**

*This paper addresses the gap in research on the social dimensions of refugee resettlement. This is accomplished by examining refugee belonging and definitions of “integration” through a case study of Acehese refugees resettled in Vancouver, British Columbia, between 2004 and 2006. We analyze findings based on a survey and in-depth interviews conducted five years after resettlement. Our findings suggest that recently resettled groups like the Acehese, who are “new and few,” face specific integration challenges. Importantly, the lengthy timelines to enact sponsorship of a spouse and/or family reunification from Aceh unwittingly inhibit the social integration of the sponsors waiting in Canada.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article traite de lacunes en matière de recherche sur les dimensions sociales de la réinstallation des réfugiés en examinant l'appartenance de réfugiés et les définitions de « l'intégration » à travers une étude de cas de réfugiés acehnais réinstallés à Vancouver en Colombie-Britannique, entre 2004 et 2006. Nous analysons les résultats sur la base d'un sondage et d'entrevues en profondeur menés cinq ans après la réinstallation. Nos résultats suggèrent que des groupes récemment réinstallés comme les habitants d'Aceh, qui sont « nouveaux et rares », sont confrontés à des difficultés d'intégration particulières. Notamment, les longs délais pour établir le parrainage d'un conjoint et/ou le regroupement des familles à Aceh empêchent sans le vouloir l'intégration sociale des parrains qui attendent au Canada.*

## **Introduction**

This article probes and enhances understandings of the social dimensions of refugee “integration” by focusing on the settlement of a small group of predominantly young, male, government-assisted refugees (GARs) originally from Aceh, Indonesia, in Vancouver, Canada. Their experiences of forced migration, extended detention in Malaysia, and Canada’s resettlement and family reunification policies dramatically shaped the circumstances of their settlement. In this article, we explore a tension between the Canadian state’s “integration” goals and personal aspirations to start families through marriages with Acehese women living abroad, or “transnational marriages,” so labelled in their organization across international borders.<sup>2</sup> We use original qualitative research to demonstrate that working towards this goal, saving money to realize it, and waiting for such relationships to materialize can impede “integration.” Although Canadian immigration and refugee policy officially aspires to facilitate refugee integration, it may also unintentionally stall this process.

In what follows, we begin by providing context that explains how Acehese refugees came to be resettled in Canada from Malaysia. We then explore meanings of refugee integration, also important to understanding discussion of Acehese refugee resettlement experiences in Canada. The subsequent section engages ideas about social bonds and belonging as qualitative measures of integration. We then delve more deeply into the empirical material driving this article, addressing the gendering of daily life and related economic decisions made by our participants. Finally, we offer concluding thoughts and policy implications.

### ***Context: Single Male Acehnese and the Road to Integration***

Of the estimated 10.5 million refugees in the world,<sup>3</sup> the Canadian government resettles up to 8,000 individuals annually through its government-assisted refugee (GAR) program.<sup>4</sup> Following the passage of the 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), Canada selects these individuals on the basis of their needs for protection, as determined by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Between 1999 and 2005, over 300,000 Acehnese were displaced within Indonesia and beyond its borders, to escape danger in the province.<sup>5</sup> Flight was particularly widespread following the May 2003 Indonesian military offensive in Aceh Province, the largest since its 1975 invasion of East Timor.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of Acehnese—young men, in particular—fled to Malaysia because of its similar language and culture.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, the UNHCR office in Malaysia estimated that between 8,000 and 9,000 Acehnese “of concern” were living undocumented in Malaysia.<sup>8</sup> After eligible Acehnese refugees had languished for several years in Malaysian detention centres, Canada and other major resettlement countries agreed to resettle eligible Acehnese refugees from the detention centres. The Canadian government processed the files of a group of 154 Acehnese individuals—predominantly single men but also some families, including women and children who accompanied the principal applicant. All were resettled in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia, between 2004 and 2006.<sup>9</sup> Canada had no history of resettling refugees from Indonesia, let alone from Aceh Province; as such, the refugees were considered “new and few.”<sup>10</sup> When the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM) rebels and the Indonesian government in August 2005 brought relative peace to Aceh, it marked an abrupt end to Acehnese refugee resettlement to Canada.

Ideally, the Canadian government, researchers, and/or service providers would trace settlement experiences of refugees over time by conducting longitudinal, transnational research. However, such data are expensive and challenging to collect, particularly amongst “new and few” groups for whom so little baseline data exist. Not only is information in Canada disaggregated to an Acehnese level non-existent, it is also difficult to conduct research in Aceh as a result of the nature of the conflict and limits on foreign researchers. In an effort to fill the gap in knowledge on “new and few” refugee resettlement, research with the resettled Acehnese was conducted in 2005 (one year after most arrived) and again in 2009 to ascertain settlement outcomes.

Initial research conducted in 2005 found a significant gender imbalance that skewed towards single, young men

in their late 20s and early 30s.<sup>11</sup> The refugees from Aceh sponsored for resettlement in Canada were in detention in Malaysia. At that time, of 70 people surveyed, 66 respondents were male; the average age of respondents was 29, and only 18 of the 66 men were married.<sup>12</sup> This article is based on subsequent research in the same urban area conducted in 2009, with approximately 73 adult men and 25 adult women living in Metro Vancouver, many of them the same respondents as in 2005. Our aim was primarily to gauge settlement success, but also to follow up on and analyze the implications of the gender imbalance.

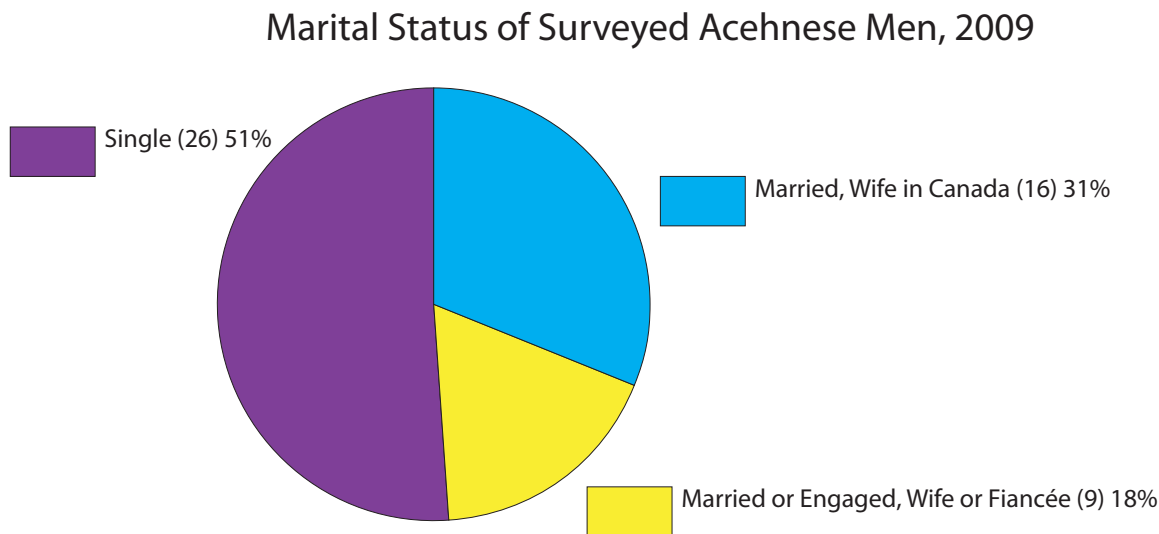
For this study, the lead author of this paper conducted 75 surveys (with 51 men and 24 women), and from among the 75 surveyed, conducted 50 subsequent in-depth semi-structured interviews (with 28 men and 22 women). We intentionally sought out a comparable number of female participants, despite the lower actual percentage of women in the community. The two-stage methodological approach, starting with short surveys, allowed us to ascertain interest among participants for a second-stage semi-structured interview with an interpreter present. In a 2010 paper, authors from the research team outlined detailed methods and overall settlement outcomes in housing, official language acquisition, employment, and participation in Canadian society among both men and women.<sup>13</sup>

Among the 51 men surveyed in 2009, the average age was 35 years, and 16 of these had a spouse in Canada. Of these 16, only 1 had married in Canada after his arrival, to a non-Acehnese Indonesian woman who had immigrated previously to Canada through the Live-in Caregiver Program. The rest were married before coming to Canada and sponsored their wives' immigration. Eight more men married Acehnese women, and 1 was engaged since arriving in Canada. All of these men remained separated geographically from their partners, who were still waiting to come to Canada in 2011. At the time of the survey, none had yet been successful in bringing an Acehnese spouse to Canada.<sup>14</sup> Two men were married when they arrived in Canada but became widowers when their wives died in the December 2004 Indian Ocean Basin tsunami. The remaining (24) men were never married.<sup>15</sup>

Among the men surveyed, 33 had arrived in Canada *unattached*, having fled Aceh to Malaysia as young unmarried men. They told us that they had few opportunities to get engaged or marry, especially once the Malaysian authorities detained them. The men spent an average of four years in detention before their resettlement in Canada, with the minimum time in Malaysia being 1 year and the maximum 12 years.

Although we did not set out to study marriage aspirations, the desire to marry among single men emerged in nearly

Figure 1: Marital status of Acehese men, 2009



Source: Participant surveys

every interview and became a central research finding pertaining to integration processes. A clearly hetero-normative perspective of marriage as a common life goal was shared among our respondents.<sup>16</sup> Although research on Acehese culture remains limited and difficult to find,<sup>17</sup> marriage is described as “essentially universal,”<sup>18</sup> with “considerable early marriage” in Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> Five years after their arrival, the initial excitement of life in Canada had been replaced with a sense of waiting and angst among most single male respondents. The resettled refugees’ concerns about isolation from wives and potential wives were clearly expressed but difficult to act upon.

In this article, we focus on the social “integration” of the single men from Aceh in relation to their married peers and to Acehese women. We define and discuss “integration” in some depth below, but use scare quotes around the term to mark its meaning as a state-directed policy goal of refugee resettlement. This is not to negate its importance, but to qualify its antecedents and authors. To us, integration is a proxy for refugee belonging in Canada and participation in all facets of Canadian society. For the refugees with whom we worked, many of whom are now citizens, coming to Canada was less about integration (the need to “fit in”) than protection (the need to be safe). Hence, we aim to balance the motivations of both state policies and those refugees whom they effect in our analysis.

Additionally, our focus on the experiences of single men—rather than on the role of the family in refugee integration in Canada—is intentional. While we acknowledge important literature on family and integration processes,<sup>20</sup> we look to scholarship on integration. This decision reflects our specific focus on the experience of individuals who were

resettled in Canada without families and are now asking the Canadian government to improve the process of spousal sponsorship through faster processing of finances and faster reunification with wives and children. This is a concern shared by other immigrant groups, beyond government-assisted refugees, as well, but affects this group of Acehese GARs in very specific ways.

### *Meanings of Refugee “Integration”*

Despite its frequent usage by government, media, settlement organizations, and academics, the term *integration* is rarely defined.<sup>21</sup> The inconsistency in definitions is partially due to the “great deal of disagreement about what constitutes integration, how one determines whether strategies for promoting integration are successful, or what the features of an integrated society are” in relation to migration.<sup>22</sup> In one view, the broadness of the concept makes a precise definition difficult, contributing to its controversy and “hot debate.”<sup>23</sup> There are questions of whether integration functions as a “two-way” process in practice, or just conceptually.<sup>24</sup> A different body of literature suggests that “integration” may be used to stress a genuine “two-way interchange of culture and understanding,” implying adaptation by both the “host” community and its institutions and newcomers. In this view, “integration” can begin “with arrival and ends when refugees are in an equal position to the majority.”<sup>25</sup> It is not difficult to understand why both a definition and clear measurements of “integration” are elusive.

In a Canadian context where the Multicultural Act of 1988 and the Federal Charter of Rights and Freedoms “institutionalize not only respect for difference but also the rights of being different,”<sup>26</sup> the term *integration* often refers to a

desirable policy goal. Integration is compared to assimilation, an implicitly ethnocentric mode of immigrant incorporation usually associated with U.S. immigration policy.<sup>27</sup> Policy-makers may be employing “integration” *in place of* rather than *in contrast to* assimilation.

Some scholars argue that *integration* is, in practice, just another word for assimilation. Geographer David Ley, for instance, contends that *integration* imposes an unfair expectation that newcomers adapt to the norms of a receiving society. He makes a version of this argument in his work on the “erosion” of multiculturalism in Canada and his conclusion that integration is not a multicultural value but rather “disguised assimilationism.”<sup>28</sup>

Although Canada implicitly commits to provide “the appropriate reception and integration of resettled refugees” under UNHCR’s Multilateral Framework of Understandings on Resettlement,<sup>29</sup> refugee integration is a nebulous term in Canadian policy.<sup>30</sup> Where are the distinctions made between integration among economic or family class immigrants, and those who come as refugees? Yet this distinction is significant for a number of reasons,<sup>31</sup> not least of which is Canada’s identification of integration as an important policy aim of the Canadian state in relation to refugee settlement. There is thus a critical need to interrogate the meaning of refugee “integration” and the government’s role in its success in Canada.

Refugees resettled in Canada receive income assistance provided by the federal Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) for up to a year, after which the Canadian government expects them to utilize services for immigrants more generally.<sup>32</sup> Since the implementation of IRPA, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) “recognizes that current resettlement programming may not adequately meet the unique and changing needs of refugees.”<sup>33</sup> The barriers refugees face in securing and maintaining adequate employment, housing, education, and language are well documented.<sup>34</sup> The economic measures of refugee integration show lower incomes than most other immigrant groups,<sup>35</sup> poorer housing conditions,<sup>36</sup> and less competence in English or French, as our 2010 study found.

Far less is known about the *social* life of refugees, because such relations are difficult to quantify. And yet research shows that social ties function as mechanisms for support during refugees’ initial settlement in Canada.<sup>37</sup> Laura Simich notes that refugee “resilience” is a resource in coping with settlement challenges, and yet it is very difficult to measure. Compared with other classes of immigrants arriving in Canada with human and/or financial capital, “one of the few resources available to most refugees is social capital in the form of social support networks.”<sup>38</sup> Yet for refugees such as the Acehnese who are “new and few,” the lack of

social support networks may present additional hurdles to social and economic participation in Canadian society.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Bonds and Belonging as Qualitative Measures of Integration***

Our purpose in probing marriage choices among Acehnese in Canada is not to imply that marrying an Acehnese spouse *in itself* indicates either a path or an impediment to “integration.” Rather, it is to show how the men’s declared need for Canadian citizenship and the economic means to travel to Aceh and marry, coupled with family reunification requirements and timelines, together create a long waiting period and one sequence of events that impedes access to official language skills, one pathway to social integration.

The desire to form bonds with—and, in this case, marry—someone from the same ethnic group who speaks the same language and shares the same interpretation of faith is not uncommon. Ager and Strang’s (2008) distinction between social *bonds* (connections linking members of a group) and social *bridges* (connections between groups) is useful to understanding integration. The maintenance of ethnic identity through connections with “like-ethnic groups” (social bonds) “in no way logically limit[s] wider integration into society”<sup>40</sup> and is instead associated with “various benefits contributing towards effective integration.”<sup>41</sup> Although social bridges are also usually positive, “involvement with one’s own ethnic group (bonding capital) influence[s] ‘quality of life’ independently of involvement with the local community (bridging capital).”<sup>42</sup>

In their discussion of social bridges, Ager and Strang make another important distinction between those reflecting “friendliness” (or a “lack of conflict and sense of acceptance”) and “more intense involvement with the local people,” or connections.<sup>43</sup> Although “friendliness” bridges are linked with safety, security, and positively self-judged “quality of life,” the latter form of bridge is “crucial in bringing longer-term social and economic benefits to a community” such as employment opportunities.<sup>44</sup>

In our study, both men and women were quick to describe “friendliness” as one respondent does here:

I feel happy in my life because the people [in Canada] are very friendly, even at work ... It’s not only your employer or a subcontractor. At the jobsite, we are team players. I feel very happy. Wow. If you need help from other workers [and ask], “Hey, can you give me a hand please?,” they just help right away ... In Hong Kong [and Malaysia where I worked,] when I asked, “Excuse me sir, can I ask [a question]?,” they didn’t even look at me. Here [in Canada when I say], “Excuse me sir?,” [they say] “Yes? How can I help you?” That’s the happiest thing for me. (Man, interview #45, p. 6, 09/13/09)

Although Malaysia offers more similarities to Acehese culture and language than Canada, cultural views of class and cultural differences prevented the formation of social bridges in the Malaysian workplace. Yet in Malaysia, many Acehese were still able to work prior to detention (albeit undocumented), despite their lack of rights; even though resettlement to Canada provides the *right* to work, it does not automatically provide *access* to a stable job. On this level, integration may proceed at different rates, based on the stratification of the society rather than the cultural similarities.

The latter "more intense" social bridges appeared less commonly in the interviews. Indeed, descriptions of significant social bridges were virtually non-existent among the single men to whom we spoke.

The surveys reflect this phenomenon on a larger level. Of the 75 Acehese men and women surveyed, 70 reported regular attendance at the Acehese Canadian Community Society (ACCS) (at least once a week), and the remaining 5 attended at least monthly, one indicator of well-developed social bonds.<sup>45</sup> Social bridges in general were much weaker, with 11 men out of 51 reporting they do "no" activities with non-Acehese people. A minority (fewer than 5 each) mentioned talking to neighbours, fellow public transportation passengers, and people at Muslim celebrations or in coffee shops, while community leaders mentioned meeting with people from other immigrant groups to discuss community-building. Among women, 8 out of 24 surveyed reported doing "no" activities with non-Acehese people. Yet women who did participate in activities with non-Acehese people cited positive and potentially "more intense" social bridges through drop-in parenting programs at community centres and neighbourhood houses, shopping, food banks, and volunteering at their children's schools.

What does this mean for the community's gender imbalance? In Ager and Strang's framework, men in particular have strong social bonds with each other, but weak social bridges beyond the community, leaving few opportunities to meet and develop relationships with unmarried women in Canada. Indeed, male respondents noted the lack of opportunities to meet women as a major hindrance to their aspirations to start a family. This is especially significant in the context of the gender-segregated nature of Acehese events. Although two men mentioned meeting and dating non-Acehese women in English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) classes, none of the respondents was enrolled in ELSA at the time of the study. A lack of official language skills is one possible explanation for the absence of such social bridges. Additional indicators of language, "cultural competency," and conflicting values further complicate the picture.

### **Gender Imbalance, Marriage, and the Social Integration of Resettled Refugees**

Social geographies of family relations in general and gender issues specifically remain understudied in refugee studies.<sup>46</sup> Bernhardt, Landolt, and Goldring interviewed 40 Latin American women in Greater Toronto who experienced tension, guilt, and isolation in relation to the long periods of family separation they experienced.<sup>47</sup>

Sex ratios in Canadian refugee resettlement policy are known to historically favour men, even when spouses and dependents are considered. This gap has closed in the last decade, especially with the increased focus on protection and reduced emphasis on admissibility criteria introduced in IRPA legislation. Yet sex ratios still vary widely, based on country of origin.

In the case of Acehese resettled in Vancouver, men outnumber women acutely. All of the Acehese women we spoke to (and reportedly all who live in Greater Vancouver) were already married. While unusual, the extreme gender imbalance among the Acehese reflects the conditions of flight and detention in Malaysia from which they came. Predictably, detention inhibited their social contacts with family and friends, and their abilities to marry.

Gender norms and expectations of marriage in Aceh differ widely from those in Canada. Since the creation of the modern Indonesian nation-state, gender relations have been reconstructed so that "on the one hand Aceh is represented by Acehese Muslim nationalists as having a long tradition of 'strong, fighting women' and on the other hand ... by the Indonesian state and military since the New Order under Suharto as the cradle of 'Islamic fundamentalism.'"<sup>48</sup> Distinct gender identities and different marriage norms are evident in responses from research participants.

We aim to highlight some of the difficulties posed by integration for resettled refugees who have spent considerable time detained in limbo and for whom the cultural limbo of adjustment continues. In a study of Southeast Asian refugees in California, the previously "illiterate, hill-tribal Hmong who came from a geographic setting that was most divergent from urban America were the most likely to suffer the greatest cultural dissonance upon arrival in the United States,"<sup>49</sup> when compared to other resettled refugee groups. Aceh, too, is a largely rural province of Sumatra, despite a pattern of coastal settlement for the majority. This is dramatically different from Canada, where 80 per cent of the population lives in urban areas. Canadian norms of gender equality were not as important to respondents as gender-segregated spaces for learning, for example. Respondents revealed significant struggles with the unfamiliarity of ELSA classroom settings in a secular, non-Muslim society where men and women learned together.

In terms of marriage practices, “the prospective husband or wife must be a Muslim ... And, in any case, it is very rare for an Acehnese to convert to or follow a different religion.”<sup>50</sup> Despite expressed interest in marrying “Canadian women” (often used interchangeably by participants with “white women,” and almost always implying non-Muslim), Acehnese men find their religious and cultural backgrounds inhibit their searches for a spouse in Canada, as one man notes:

I like white girls, but when I talk to white girls, the conversation doesn't go smoothly ... That's why I'm not happy in [Canada.] If you want to have a white girl, you have to go to a club and drink alcohol ... it's unacceptable in my culture. I tried but it didn't work ... I'm thinking to get a girl from my culture, because [in Aceh] when men come home from work the food is already on the table so the husband just eats, and if the husband gets mad, his wife never talks back or complains. This is my culture ... If I can find a white girl, I will not go back to Aceh, but it's so difficult to find a local girl. (Man, interview #18, pp. 4–5, 8, 07/28/09)<sup>51</sup>

The absence of family ties in Canada may also augment the difficulties single Acehnese men face in finding a wife.<sup>52</sup> One respondent in our study captures this sentiment well:

In Aceh it's easier [than in Canada to find a wife]. Here you have to have a personal relationship with a girl, then after living together for awhile you decide if you want to get married. In Aceh the parents or family members just introduce you and ... it's not based on a relationship. If the man likes the girl, they get married. Easy. There's no need for a slow process ... here you can test the water. You can test if you fit together ... because here [Canadians] have a perception that you marry only one time, so when they get married they really get together. In my culture it's different. I can have another wife. (Man, interview #33, p. 6, 08/12/09)

At least two observations emerge from this excerpt. First, the “social division of labour”—the role of matching young men and women for marriage—is done by parents, not by the brides or grooms themselves. Indeed, since kinship is central to the social structure in Aceh, marriage is a village affair in Aceh and used to build alliances.<sup>53</sup> The absence of such supports in Canada and the shift in responsibility must be considered in the Canadian context. A second important observation involves culturally distinct understandings of marriage.

Only one man revealed a sustained relationship with a non-Acehnese woman in Canada. This particular man spoke English relatively well and was the only individual to live by himself in a neighbourhood with no other Acehnese. Nonetheless, he appeared conflicted about his future:

I have a girlfriend in Aceh and I have a girlfriend [from China] in Canada also ... I don't know [what to do] because everything is different. I need to really, really think about which way is better ... I need to respect [the Acehnese community.] I need to do [what is good.] If I do something not good, if they know—my religion is different. So if I have a girlfriend from a different country, if that girl wants to come to my religion, maybe I will get married. But if not, most people [won't accept it]. [With] different religions it's very hard. (Man, interview #39, p. 6, 08/19/09)

Men's expectations generally contrasted with the perspectives of married Acehnese women who lived in Canada for three or four years. In general, women spoke positively of working outside the home in Canada. Acehnese women also described changes in their sense of independence in relation to their husbands, based on examples of other women witnessed while in Canada:

The first time I arrived here I felt it was so hard. I did not know how to communicate, did not know where to go. I did not have the courage to go by myself. Everywhere my husband went I had to follow. I always needed my husband's guidance ... but now I feel that I have more courage. I can go everywhere by myself. [It changed because] in my mind, it's impossible to always follow the husband. Why can other people make it? Why can't I? I have to try also. If other people can do it, I will try. I can do it also. (Woman, interview #3, p. 4, 07/12/09)

For both men and women respondents, shifts in cultural norms are selective. Some Acehnese norms, such as patriarchal views of marriage, are praised and retained by several of the Acehnese-Canadian men, while others, such as hierarchical power structures in employment settings, are criticized when compared to Canadian norms. If integration requires refugees to “adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose one's own cultural identity,”<sup>54</sup> then this balance must be better understood. What one should preserve and what one should adapt are not always clear.

Yet despite the difficulty in finding a wife in Canada, the alternative—facilitating a transnational marriage—presents its own set of challenges: “If I can find a girl here [in Canada], I want to be married here because if you sponsor a wife you have to wait” (Man, interview #41, p. 7, 08/20/09). As this quote suggests, a transnational marriage with an Acehnese spouse requires Canadian citizenship and considerable funds to travel home and pay for the wedding. This is true for all immigrants who sponsor family members abroad, but for these men, their status as single men and refugees with attendant loan repayment and modest incomes make their challenges distinct. Additional money is required to pay remittances to support fiancées during the process of

family reunification. On top of these demands, one must also be committed to enduring the wait.

Because a major goal of the single men we interviewed was to marry Acehese women, they faced even more pressure to save money to cover associated costs. GARs have one to three years before they are expected to pay back their initial transportation loan; the subsequent interest that accrues after the first year is not permitted in the strict Acehese interpretation of Islam. Additionally, interviewees expressed concern that any debt to the government may hamper their financial ability to sponsor a spouse. Other expenses relate to communication, such as calling cards to contact potential wives, fiancées, and wives back in Aceh. Still more resources are required to support additional family in Aceh: "Single [men] who married [someone] in Aceh have to send money every month [and] support three families now because they have to support themselves, they have to support their wife, and they have to support their own parents. So they have to send three [times the money]. So that's why they have to look for another job" (Man, interview #31, p. 13, 08/11/09).

Remittances from Vancouver have been critical for many families in Aceh after the 2004 tsunami devastated the coast. Even so, about half of all respondents in our study said they wanted to send more money than they can. Sponsorship is another significant expense: "There is a certain doctor [approved] to do the medical tests [for the Citizenship and Immigration Canada sponsorship application], and unfortunately the doctor [is] only in Medan, about one day from Banda Aceh. I have money difficulties right now because [of my] economic situation. I have to send money back home in order for [my wife] to travel to go to Medan and to pay for the doctor too, right?" (Man, interview #22, p. 8, 08/04/09). The largest financial outlays for prospective grooms are threefold: the airfare back to Aceh, the "bride wealth" or "bride price" (called *mahr* in Arabic), and the cost of the wedding. A return economy airfare to Banda Aceh runs approximately CAD\$2000 and the *mahr* ranges from CAD\$2000 to CAD\$5000,<sup>55</sup> so these amounts prove difficult to produce, particularly for individuals in the seasonal or part-time labour market or on social assistance. For strictly observant Muslims who cannot pay interest on loans, accessing credit proved to be difficult for many Acehese—not only those saving for travel and marriage costs, but also for entrepreneurs who were committed to opening new businesses or those repaying transportation loans before interest began to accrue. Negotiating their faith with market values in Canada creates obstacles to financial independence and ultimately larger life goals.<sup>56</sup> In addition, traditional long-term financial obligations to both the man's family and his spouse's family

add additional pressure for a continuous source of dependable remittances.<sup>57</sup>

In short, the desire and costs to marry someone from Aceh are high, and one must wait in Canada to save funds to cover the cost of a passport, travel, the ceremony, and other financial obligations. While a GAR applicant with a spouse or children is permitted to include these family members on his initial application for resettlement, an unmarried GAR must follow many steps before being able to find and sponsor a spouse from the home country. Such efforts, however, are also at odds with "integration" in some sense. While participation in the labour force is avid (when work is found), jobs are low-skilled and often temporary.<sup>58</sup> The survey revealed that 19 of the 52 men were unemployed, although anecdotally we learned that this proportion grew significantly as the 2009 recession progressed.<sup>59</sup> Amongst those men who were employed, the average wage was reported to be \$18.30 per hour, although only roughly two-thirds of those employed were willing to give an exact number.<sup>60</sup> Official language skills are poor: among those surveyed, the average ELSA level achieved is between 2 and 3 among men out of 6 possible levels.<sup>61</sup> Official language learning appeared to be a much lower priority for the Acehese single men than the economic imperatives of repaying transportation loans and establishing families of their own.

Employment and official language learning may well be at odds with one another.<sup>62</sup> One needs to hold several jobs in order to save for a transnational marriage; this can preclude attending ESL classes in Vancouver. The skewed sex ratio of those Acehese who came to Canada (far more men than women) explains some of this conundrum. In any case, these findings prove significant in understanding barriers to social integration for resettled refugees with family members overseas whom they wish to sponsor or who wish to marry someone from abroad.

### ***Lives on Hold, Narratives of Waiting, and the Quest for Citizenship***

For refugees—both those from protracted refugee situations in camps and asylum seekers—waiting "has become the rule, not the exception."<sup>63</sup> In an unfortunate twist, waiting can also persist *after* refugee resettlement. For the few who are able to pass the Canadian citizenship test, acquire a passport, and accrue enough money, the years of waiting to return to Aceh ends with the start of a second phase of waiting. After getting married in Aceh, the men (who are now Canadian and lack Indonesian passports) return to Canada, where they begin processing their wives' sponsorship applications if they have sufficient funds. The reunification process is lengthy. At time of press, the average processing time for permanent resident applications submitted by spouses

from within Indonesia was 30 months, not including the additional approval step for the Canadian sponsor.<sup>64</sup> Yet the saving and preparing for marriage, let alone the sponsorship application, take many more years. After experiencing protracted detention, the waiting continues.

In addition to financial resources, transnational marriage also involves transitions in legal status. In the case of the Acehnese men we interviewed, acquisition of Canadian citizenship is a prerequisite. The first step towards sponsoring an Acehnese spouse is either a travel document or a passport in order to travel back to Aceh and get married. Because almost all the Acehnese men we interviewed were hesitant to deal with the Indonesian Embassy in Canada, the acquisition of Canadian citizenship has a specific purpose and sense of urgency for these single men as a step towards marriage.

Although GARs arrive in Canada and gain permanent residency very quickly, obtaining citizenship—and, hence, a passport—is another matter. Basic English or French is required and yet not acquired by several of the men we interviewed. As one man explained, marriage was simply not an option for him in the near future because he lacked a combination of money, work, citizenship, and a passport: “I have no plan [to get married] because I am too young. I have no passport and no job, so I can’t. Not in the short term” (Man, interview #34, p. 13, 08/14/09). Although he describes himself as young, this man is also referring to his age in relation to saving enough money, obtaining citizenship, and travelling to Aceh. For the men with official language and employment struggles, the promise of marriage and starting a family in Canada remains far off. The resulting waiting period puts lives on hold and does little to improve prospects of social “integration,” especially given the explicitly economic imperatives to work to realize these goals.

Our respondents recounted varied “waiting” narratives. One man, for example, was engaged in 2002 but fled to Malaysia in 2003 and was later put into detention there before coming to Canada. Because he did not list his fiancée on his initial resettlement application to Canada out of fear of rejection, he came to Canada alone. Despite constant contact with his fiancée, he has not seen her for eight years and reported that she is growing impatient. Another man explains that the waiting can be intolerable: “Before [coming to Canada] I had a girlfriend, but she married [someone else] because she was worried I could not go back [to Aceh] ... When she told me, I cried. And right now I’m just single” (Man, interview #43, p. 5, 09/06/09). Another man met his fiancée while working in Malaysia before being detained and was separated from her for five years until recently returning to Aceh to marry her. At the time the study concluded, they

were again enduring a second separation period while waiting for Canada to approve her sponsorship.

Even after sponsorship approval, difficulties related to separation can ensue, particularly in a context of “new and few” refugee resettlements lacking the established narratives of migration. As one man describes it,

[I was told] after the approval it takes only six to months. [My wife] was approved [almost a year ago], but she doesn’t have a visa [or an interview] yet. So right now the problem is ... my wife feels like oh, maybe I am playing around, not telling the truth ... In Indonesia when you get married to somebody far away, neighbours and family [get suspicious] and ask if he will fulfil his promise. [Especially] my wife’s parents. So right now there’s some bad gossip. [They say I’m] like a sailor. So whenever I talk about coming to Canada, my wife is a little bit stressed because she doesn’t want to talk about it. (Man, interview #30, p. 7, 08/11/09)

All this is to ignore the sheer difficulty of being separated from one’s partner. Participants reported forms of emotional and physical distress resulting from this wait: “I can’t sleep because I miss her ... if the government delays too long I will become crazy” (Man, interview #8, p. 7, 07/19/09). Another said, “Being separated is very hard. We were together not even two months [in Aceh], and then I had to come back [to Canada]. I don’t know how to express it. I know she feels [the same]. She cries every night. We both want to be together [all the time], everywhere. Not just here [in Canada]—everywhere. [We both want to be] together. Just like that” (Man, interview #45, p. 4, 09/13/09).

For the majority of Acehnese men, however, the waiting is not for a particular person but for the nebulous hope of returning to Aceh in the future to get married. For these men, waiting to get married was commonly accepted as inevitable, and its perpetual presence served as a backdrop for all decisions. This waiting has inhibited enrolment in ELSA classes, prevented men from making long-term commitments to housing and employment, and generated an angst that permeates the wider community. Integration, ironically, was not impeded by the trauma of prior detention, except perhaps by the skewed sex ratio it shaped, but by the policies and procedures of immigration that made the resettled refugees wait for a spouse.

Given these conditions, many of the Acehnese men are single today as an outcome of the *combination* of forced migration to Malaysia, detention there, and Canadian family reunification policies. Single men work when possible, wait, and save to obtain Canadian citizenship and enough resources to marry a partner from Aceh. No isolated factors created this social isolation, yet personal goals may well get in the way of “integration” as construed by



the Canadian state. These men remain in limbo in Canada, "waiting for a wife."

On a final note, a new problem is emerging for some respondents from our study: among those who have returned to Aceh to get married, some now have pregnant wives still in Aceh or even newborn children who are waiting for legal entry into Canada. In at least one instance, the birth of the child has complicated and prolonged the sponsorship processing time of the wife, worrying other community members that the same will happen to them. The protracted separations and isolation thus continue in new ways.

### Conclusion

As governments, NGOs, and researchers continue to test, monitor, and evaluate group settlement strategies, further research is sorely needed on settlement outcomes such as social inclusion and integration. To focus solely on the more measurable aspects of settlement and integration (e.g., housing, official language acquisition, and employment) without attending to the social dimensions that shape inclusion and participation in Canadian society (e.g., sex ratios, community cohesiveness, and geographical concentrations) misses some of the nuanced antecedents to social dislocation that we illustrate here. In the case of the Acehnese, the combination of factors leads to unique struggles, and their attempts to solve these struggles may in fact impede integration.

While this research could not trace the direct effects of detention in Malaysia on refugee settlement in Canada, it is clear that the secure and closed conditions of detention shaped the selection of who came to Canada and detainees' access to family and friends during their incarceration. The detention dimension of their forced migration can only exacerbate their feelings of isolation.

Family reunification policies could be more effective if integration was clearly defined. The expectation that newcomers respect "basic Canadian values" and Canadians respect the "cultural diversity" newcomers bring to Canada needs to be operationalized, especially the latter.<sup>65</sup>

Post-IRPA GARs are different from those resettled before IRPA. Likewise, the decision to enact group processing of resettled refugees from protracted situations generates distinct cohorts of refugees. During the 2000s, Canadian group processing brought resettled refugees from protracted refugee situations created by source countries like Burma (Karen refugees via Thailand) and Bhutan (Lhotshampas via Nepal). These groups are also relatively "new and few" with specific settlement challenges of their own.<sup>66</sup> Recent changes enacted by the Canadian government to create the "visa office referred" refugee category will also demand new research. Government, settlement agencies, and researchers

can more carefully define and address refugee "integration" in particular. Interviews with Acehnese men reveal significant differences between some men's understandings of gender and marriage expectations and Canadian norms.

Quite invisible in this discussion is the "two-way street" aspect of "integration." The question remains whether "integration" truly is a mutual process of engagement and accommodation, or largely unidirectional. Refugee resettlement is a *humanitarian* form of "premeditated, state-planned, government-managed migration and settlement"<sup>67</sup> and thus involves a role for the state that is somewhat distinct from its role in other forms of immigration. At least in the Acehnese case, the two-way definition of integration seems limited in practice, and we echo Daniel Hiebert and Kathy Sherrell in their call for a larger role for Canadian society in facilitating "integration."<sup>68</sup>

The social is often connected to the economic realities of wanting to make marriage happen.<sup>69</sup> Affording a family is the first hurdle. In this context, the Canadian government could contemplate an expedited spousal sponsorship process for all GARs who were detained by a third country government for a period of years before their arrival. An expedited spousal sponsorship process could also be warranted in light of the skewed sex ratio among the refugees who were selected to come to Canada. This is critical because no extant co-ethnic Acehnese community met this group; they were "new and few."

Such change could allow the Acehnese to shift their gaze from Aceh to Greater Vancouver; from working multiple jobs to afford travel to Aceh to accessing English / official language learning that promises better jobs in Canada and more meaningful contact with other Canadians; and from negotiating Canadian immigration regulations to negotiating Canadian society. Belonging to Canada could continue apace.

### NOTES

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- American Newcomers," *International Migration* 47, no. 2 (2009): 3–31.
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  5. Elizabeth F. Drexler, *Aceh, Indonesia: Securing the Insecure State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Arno Waizenegger and Jennifer Hyndman, "Two Solitudes: Post-Tsunami and Post-Conflict Aceh," *Disasters* 34, no. 3 (2010): 787–808.
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  9. Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, *Faces of Refugees: Settlement Patterns in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) January 2003–December 2006* (Vancouver: Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, 2008), [http://issbc.org/system/cms/files/139/files/original/faces\\_of\\_refugees\\_6.pdf](http://issbc.org/system/cms/files/139/files/original/faces_of_refugees_6.pdf).
  10. Jennifer Hyndman and James McLean, "Settling like a State: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19, no. 3 (2006): 345–60.
  11. *Ibid.*, 356. We use the terms *gender imbalance* (the ratio of women to men) and *sex ratio* (the number of females compared to males in a population) somewhat interchangeably here, despite the differences between sex and gender. We take gender to be socially constructed as a reference to men's and women's identities and relations to one another, and sex to be a biological reference to females and males.
  12. *Ibid.*
  13. Lisa Ruth Brunner, Jennifer Hyndman, and Chris Friesen, "Aceh-Malaysia-Vancouver: Settlement among Acehnese Refugees Five Years On," Working Paper Series, no. 10–12 (Vancouver, BC: Metropolis British Columbia, 2010), <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2010/WP10-12.pdf>.
  14. At the time of the dissemination event in July 2010, the first sponsored Acehnese spouse had just arrived in Canada.
  15. Brunner, Hyndman, and Friesen, *Aceh-Malaysia-Vancouver*.
  16. We recognize the potential pitfalls of hetero-normativity by focusing on marriage. Although gender-neutral terms such as *spouse* were used by the interviewer, they were likely understood in hetero-normative terms (e.g., *wife*). At the time of writing, homosexuality is illegal in Aceh under a provincial bylaw ("Indonesia Must Repeal 'Cruel' New Stoning and Caning Law," *Amnesty International News*, 17 September 2009, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/news/indonesia-must-repeal-cruel-new-stoning-caning-law-20090917>), although this of course does not mean homosexuality does not exist there. Throughout the research, all male respondents who were married or discussed their desire to get married referred to women.
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  18. G. W. Jones and B. Gubhaju. "Trends in Age at Marriage in the Provinces of Indonesia," Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series no. 105 (Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2008), 6. [http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps08\\_105.pdf](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps08_105.pdf).
  19. *Ibid.*, 3.
  20. Bernhard, Landolt, and Goldring, "Transnationalizing Families."
  21. Stephen Castles, Maja Korac, Ellie Vasta, and Steven Vertovec, *Integration: Mapping the Field* (Oxford: Centre for Migration and Policy Research and Refugee Studies Centre, 2002), 114; Frank van Tubergen, *Immigrant Integration: A Cross-National Study* (New York: LBF Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2006).
  22. G. Atfield, K. Brahmabhatt, and T. O'Toole. *Refugees' Experiences of Integration* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2007), 12. [http://socialwelfare.bl.uk/subject-areas/services-client-groups/asylum-seekers-refugees/refugeecouncil/147486refugees\\_experiences\\_of\\_integration\\_2007.pdf](http://socialwelfare.bl.uk/subject-areas/services-client-groups/asylum-seekers-refugees/refugeecouncil/147486refugees_experiences_of_integration_2007.pdf).
  23. Castles et al., *Integration*, 114.
  24. *Ibid.*, 113, emphasis in original.
  25. Jenny Phillimore and Lisa Goodson, "Making a Place in the Global City: The Relevance of Indicators of Integration," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21 no. 3 (2008): 309.
  26. David Ley, "Post-Multiculturalism?," Working Paper Series, no. 05–18 (Vancouver, BC: Metropolis British Columbia, 2005), <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2005/WP05-18.pdf> (accessed 03 April 2013).
  27. *Ibid.*, 17.
  28. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
  29. Debra Pressé and Jessie Thomson, "The Resettlement Challenge: Integration of Refugees from Protracted Refugee Situations," *Refuge* 25, no. 1 (2008): 94–9.
  30. *Ibid.*
  31. First, refugee resettlement programs are explicitly *humanitarian* rather than *economic* endeavours. Second, refugee migration is inherently rooted in a fear of persecution and likely involves more trauma than that of immigrants. Finally, the selection and settlement of refugees from overseas is done at the discretion of the state. Federal governments who agree to resettle refugees are thus responsible for the "integration" of government-assisted refugees, as

- mandated by the UNHCR. Soojin Yu, Estelle Ouellet, and Angelyn Warmington, "Refugee Integration in Canada: A Survey of Empirical Evidence and Existing Services," *Refugee* 24 no. 2 (2007): 18.
32. Daniel Hiebert and Kathy Sherrell, "The Integration and Inclusion of Newcomers in British Columbia," Working Paper Series, no. 09–11 (Vancouver, BC: Metropolis British Columbia, 2009), <http://www.mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2009/WP09-11.pdf>.
  33. Pressé and Thomson, "Resettlement Challenge," 96.
  34. For example, see Yu, Ouellet, and Warmington, "Refugee Integration in Canada"; Hiebert and Sherrell, "Integration and Inclusion of Newcomers"; and Kathy Sherrell and Immigrant Services Society of BC, *At Home in Surrey? The Housing Experiences of Refugees in Surrey, b.c. (Final Report)* (Vancouver: Immigrant Services Society of BC, 2009), <http://www.surrey.ca/files/HousingExperiencesofRefugeesJune2009.pdf>.
  35. D. Hiebert, "The Economic Integration of Immigrants in Metro Vancouver," Working Paper Series, no. 09–11 (Vancouver, BC: Metropolis British Columbia, 2009), <http://mbc.metropolis.net/assets/uploads/files/wp/2009/WP09-08.pdf>.
  36. Sherrell and Immigrant Services Society of BC, *At Home in Surrey?*
  37. Laura Simich, "Negotiating Boundaries of Refugee Resettlement: A Study of Settlement Patterns and Social Support," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 40, no. 5 (2003): 575–91.
  38. Navjot K. Lamba and Harvey Krahn, "Social Capital and Refugee Resettlement: The Social Networks of Refugees in Canada," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 4, no. 3 (2003): 336.
  39. Hyndman and McLean, "Settling like a State."
  40. Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (2008): 186.
  41. *Ibid.*, 178.
  42. *Ibid.*
  43. *Ibid.*, 180.
  44. *Ibid.*
  45. The organization of the Acehnese Canadian Community Society (ACCS) and the initial rental of a community space took place before the late-2000s recession when the majority of Acehnese men were able to find relatively high-paying jobs in the construction industry. Since a significant number of Acehnese men have lost jobs, the successful continuation of a community space is up in the air. At the time of writing, the community is able to afford only a basement space, which is half of what they were previously renting. To read the ACCS Constitution, see appendix G.
  46. Doreen Maire Indra, "Ethnic Human Rights and Feminist Theory: Gender Implications for Refugee Studies and Practice," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 2, no. 2 (1989): 221–42; Seteney Shami, "Transnationalism and Refugee Studies: Rethinking Forced Migration and Identity in the Middle East," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9, no. 1 (1996): 3–26; Kathy Sherrell and Jennifer Hyndman, "Global Minds, Local Bodies: Kosovar Transnational Connections beyond British Columbia," *Refugee* 23, no. 1 (2006): 16–26; Jennifer Hyndman, "Introduction: The Gendered Politics of Refugee Migration," *Gender, Place and Culture* 17, no. 4 (2010): 453–9.
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  48. Jacqueline Aquino Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism and the State in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.
  49. Yu-Wen Ying and Phillip D. Akutsu, "Psychological Adjustment of Southeast Asian Refugees: The Contribution of Sense of Coherence," *Journal of Community Psychology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 135.
  50. Graf, Schroter, and Wieringa, *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, 187.
  51. Since we employed a Bahasa Indonesia interpreter for the interviews and the first language of the respondents is Acehnese, here it is necessary to problematize research based on interpretation and note the dangers of (mis)translations. In addition, the association between "being Canadian" and "whiteness" points to a larger discussion of race and the understanding of Canadian identity; see Brunner, Hyndman, and Friesen, "Aceh-Malaysia-Vancouver," 15–16.
  52. Ager and Strang, "Understanding Integration," 178.
  53. Graf, Schroter, and Wieringa, *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, 160.
  54. UNHCR, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2002), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/405189284.html>.
  55. Personal communication, 20 October 2010.
  56. Another consideration is the provision of aid in finding financial assistance in order to comply with sharia law; see Ijara Canada, <http://www.ijaracanada.com/>.
  57. Graf, Schroter, and Wieringa, *Aceh: History, Culture and Politics*, 162–3. Although note that the authors suggest that men are frequently living far away from wives and children to work in Aceh, so separation is common.
  58. Brunner, Hyndman, and Friesen, *Aceh-Malaysia-Vancouver*.
  59. *Ibid.*
  60. Lisa Brunner, "From Protracted Situations to Protracted Separations: Acehnese-Canadian Refugee Settlement in Vancouver, BC" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2010), <http://troy.lib.sfu.ca/record=b6199504~S1a>.
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64. At press time, Indonesian residents submitted their spousal applications to Singapore. According to CIC, it took thirty months to process 80 per cent of all cases submitted to Singapore between 1 January and 31 December 2013. See "Processing Times: Family Sponsorship," CIC, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/times/perm-fc.asp>.
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