

Roundtable on **Refusal** in Refugee Resettlement & Sponsorship | 28 Oct 2021 | CARFMS Conference, University of Regina (virtual)

Participants: Alfredo Barahona, Dawit Demoz, Stacey Haugen, Jennifer Hyndman, Natasha Nicholls, Connor Sarazin, Louisa Taylor, Samia Teclé
Moderators: Biftu Yousuf and Johanna Reynolds

The session builds upon insights and themes that have come out from Hyndman's (2017-2021) research on private refugee sponsorship in Canada. What emerged from this research, in part, are stories of refusal - refusal to accept the status quo; refusal to be silenced; refusal to be separated from loved ones; refusal of the terms, institutions, and labels that are prescribed onto individuals or organizations doing this important and much needed work. Influenced by the work of Indigenous, Black and anti-colonial thinkers (Audra Simpson 2007, 2014; Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang 2014; Tina Campt and Saidiya Hartman 2015), we recognize that individuals and communities perform acts of refusal on a daily basis as a form of resistance to injustice at multiple scales. To be clear, for these thinkers' refusal is more than just saying 'no' - it is a line of questioning, an enactment of possibility. We asked our invited guests a series of questions to prompt reflection on, and examples of, refusal in the context of their work and the broader resettlement context. What follows is a summary of this discussion.

I. HAVE YOU ENGAGED WITH THE CONCEPT OF REFUSAL IN THE CONTEXT OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT / SPONSORSHIP? IF SO, HOW?

A refusal to accept the colonial history of Indigenous peoples in Canada

As settlers, immigrants, refugees, and guests, the history of Canada is often learned from a colonial perspective. For many refugees, there are parallels between the struggles of Indigenous peoples in Canada and the Indigenous communities in their country of origin. We must commit to listening to Indigenous peoples and take their lead. There are a number of community initiatives, such as the KAIROS blanket exercise, that aim to decolonize hegemonic systems of knowledge and Canadian history.

A refusal to allow Indigenous communities to be pitted against newcomer communities

There is an opportunity for important solidarity work between newcomer communities and Indigenous communities, as both are living a process of colonialism and displacement from their ancestral homes and lands. In some instances, they are pitted against one another when government support provided to refugees is seen as being prioritized over the needs of Indigenous communities. Important work is being done at the community level (for example, in Winnipeg, Canada) to increase awareness and safety through neighbourhood patrols.

A refusal to accept government policy frameworks

For many who are involved with refugee sponsorship, the resettlement program is seen as a pathway that the government has offered them (to express their humanitarian interests or reunite families at risk). As such, this sponsorship work is undertaken within existing state frameworks. Acts of refusal take place at the level of sponsorship agreement holders, community organizations, and others working to change policy. The pushback on policy as status quo means that groups are having active discussions on the number of sponsorship spaces, on equity and urgent needs, on the backlog which has now reached over 70,000 applications and on improving the Blended Visa Office-Referral (BVOR) program. In this context, refusal may not be seen as a complete refusal, but rather a willingness to work within existing government frameworks and to be committed to influencing policy-making. The Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) Association and Council have been able to put forward a strong voice by making demands that have led Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to implement some of their requests. This has included concerns raised about the implementation of the Program Integrity Framework (PIF) and the formalization of program assurance for Canada's private sponsorship program. As a result of these pushbacks by sponsorship advocates, IRCC delayed the roll out of the PIF, and made a commitment to involve the Council for feedback throughout the process.

A refusal to employ state categories

Some scholars enact discursive refusal by rejecting the labels and categories that have been used to pit resettled refugees against asylum seekers. The binary of deserving vs undeserving has no place in Canadian refugee policy.

A refusal to be silent on the practices of racialized exclusion in resettlement policy

For many refugees fleeing authoritarian regimes, their lifetime is one of refusal. While sponsorship organizations, academics, and refugee advocates have come together and refused government policies, questions are raised about how and when they prioritize their voices. How will advocates navigate decisions around what refugee populations to advocate for? How will advocacy ensure that it does not reproduce discrimination, prejudice, and racism by prioritizing refugee populations from certain geographies over others?

A refusal to accept anti-immigrant or unwelcoming narratives

In the UK context, community sponsorship volunteers refuse to align themselves with the anti-migrant, hostile narratives that are all too common in the UK at the moment. This act of solidarity with refugees and other migrants begins as an act of refusal at a policy level, and leads into an ethics of care, to refuse how people are treated, and to advocate more broadly for their inclusion.

Refusal in rural places was very strong among sponsors - refusal to accept the narrative that rural places are unwelcoming or inherently racist, often an external assumption that is internalized by those living there.

Sometimes this turns into an active choice to involve the wider community even more. For example, sponsors have set up booths in stores to talk to people about sponsorship, held community meetings, contacted church orgs to get support. There is an assumption that newcomers will want to leave rural communities, and so something needs to be done to address unwelcoming and hostile attitudes. Even in difficult situations - for example, sponsorship breakdowns - when social networks are built out more broadly, families have decided to stay in their resettled communities. They get to know everyone and love the community they become a part of. In this case, sponsored refugees enact refusal as the choice to stay.

A refusal to accept a strict focus on the urban in refugee sponsorship programming

Acts of refusal can also be everyday acts that contribute to long term change. For rural residents, this is practiced by refusing to be left out of sponsorship, a program which tends to be focused on the provision of services concentrated in urban centres. There is also active refusal on the part of refugees who wish to be relocated to a different community; advocating for their relocation from an urban to a rural community is also an act of agency in a context where refugees are not always able to choose their resettlement location.

II. HOW TO FOSTER UNDERSTANDING AND RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NEWCOMERS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES?

- There are many emerging initiatives in the wider community that aim to re/build relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous Canadians.
- Encourage newcomers to reflect on their relationship to their new place, with Indigenous peoples, and to the relationship between Indigenous peoples in their new place and at home. Where are they located and what does it mean to be a Canadian?
- Sponsor groups could prepare and distribute resources underscoring the colonial history of Canada and experiences of Indigenous peoples in order to better inform those they sponsor.
- Educate resettlement workers themselves to reframe false narratives and prejudices about Indigenous peoples.
- Canadians all have an obligation to build a more inclusive Canada and chart toward decolonial futures.
- For organizations, it is important for them to reflect on their specific role in truth and reconciliation.
- The Canadian government has a responsibility to continue funding organizations like the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP), so that they can continue providing informational events and strengthening Indigenous-newcomer-sponsor relations.

III. HOW DO REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP COMMUNITIES CHALLENGE, UNSETTLE, AND NAVIGATE UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONS AT MULTIPLE SCALES AND ACROSS GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS?

There is never a shortage of 'crises' in the world and yet certain 'crises' receive more attention than others. The types of representation or platforms that certain communities receive or do not receive is shocking. This can be seen at the level of local governance, for example, only recently was a person from a single-population organization selected to join a member-representative Board to carry out their mission and mandate to unify and enable the voices of private refugee sponsors. The individual selected hails from a racialized community that heavily relies on and tries to access the very sponsorship program at the centre of the Boards mandate. Underrepresentation can also be observed in terms of inequitable processing times at visa offices and the attention files receive from IRCC. It is promising to witness the SAH Association and Council actively engaging with these concerns and raising them with IRCC.

Transnational networks in sponsorship are of significant importance, but they are often under-recognized and under-appreciated by governments. For instance, one motivating factor galvanizing sponsors to continue undertaking sponsorship emerges from an understanding that BVORs, GARs, and PSRs often leave family members abroad and at risk. People are made to wait for years before displacement is addressed - if at all. In spite of this, there has been push back on the part of the government to recognize and explicitly support family-linked sponsorship. The caution here is to avoid falling into a nationalist view of sponsorship; there is a need to see connections to the transnational. For example, the Immigration, Refugee, and Protection Act (IRPA) defines family so narrowly around a 'nuclear' structure, which enacts a kind of violence because many types of family formations are left out of such restrictive notions of what constitutes a family. SAHs have unsettled some of that violence through their practices of sponsorship.

While power relations are not always immediately obvious, sponsor groups and sponsored families become more aware of how power operates as the sponsorship proceeds. The balance between sponsors providing support and sponsors encouraging families to find their independence is one example of how power manifests in sponsorship. Sometimes sponsorship groups struggle with paternalistic attitudes and wanting to protect sponsored families, at the cost of not always allowing them to live their lives as they see fit. When sponsored families and refugees engage the wider community, it allows them to gain back their power. For example, through volunteering they may find a job or improve their English. In that sense, a family's act of refusal to detach themselves from the sponsors is a point in their journey - they are saying 'thank you for your help, but we are ok on our own'. So, refusal can also be an act of empowerment.