

Volume 1



Metropolis eBook

Beyond 2020: Renewing Canada's Commitment to immigration

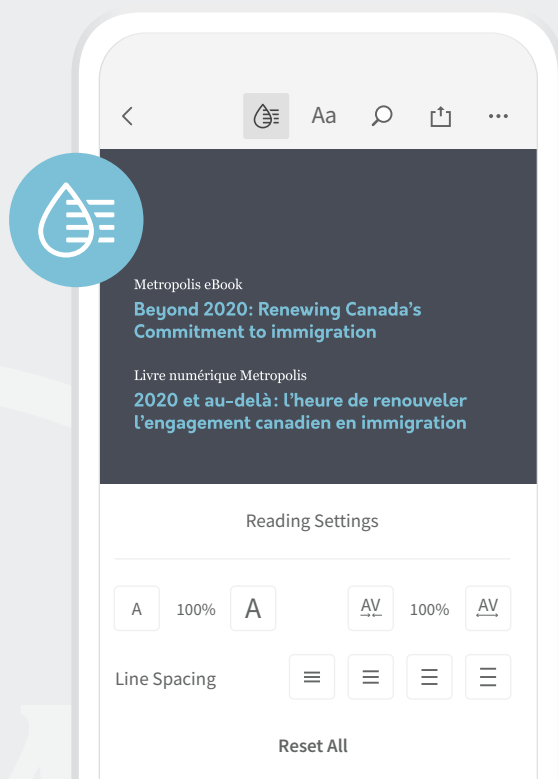
Livre numérique Metropolis

2020 et au-delà: l'heure de renouveler l'engagement canadien en immigration

*Selected presentations from
the 22nd Metropolis Canada Conference*

*Une sélection de présentations
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CAMILAHGO. studio créatif

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Section 4

Gender & Intersectionality

Genre et intersectionnalité

Gender and the Resettlement of Yazidis in Calgary:

A Deep Dive in the Resettlement, Health, Carework and Education Processes¹

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¹ The research conducted by University of Calgary researchers was funded with the Insight Development Grant (2018) by Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Abstract

Feminist scholars of refugee and immigration studies have shown gender to be the organizing principle for resettlement experiences of newcomers. This chapter, co-authored by researchers and practitioners, focuses on how gendered needs of the Yazidi refugee families in Calgary shaped their resettlement services and experiences. Based on keen observations by staff at the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society and the physicians and healthcare providers at the Mosaic Refugee Clinic in Calgary, combined with in-depth interviews conducted by University of Calgary researchers with nearly all Yazidi families in Calgary (45 families that include 241 family members) we focus on four key aspects:

- 1_ Restructuring of the resettlement program by CCIS to meet the needs of Yazidi women and men, but mainly women;
- 2_ Readjusting healthcare services by gender at the refugee clinic;
- 3_ Care provisions in the families of the Yazidis that was fulfilled by women (internal and external to the families) care providers; and
- 4_ Gendered and un-gendered educational outcomes for the children in Yazidi families. We argue that centering gender-based needs of the Yazidi community in the resettlement services has resulted in a feminist reorientation of the resettlement services and experiences of the Yazidis in Calgary.

Résumé

Les universitaires féministes des études sur les réfugiés et l'immigration ont montré que le genre est le principe organisateur des expériences de réinstallation des nouveaux arrivants. Ce chapitre, co-écrit par des chercheurs et des praticiens, met l'accent sur la façon dont les besoins sexospécifiques des familles de réfugiés yazidis à Calgary ont influencé leurs services et leurs expériences de réinstallation. Sur la base d'observations approfondies du personnel de la Calgary Catholic Immigration Society et des médecins et prestataires de soins de santé de la Mosaic Refugee Clinic de Calgary, combinées à des entretiens approfondis menés par des chercheurs de l'Université de Calgary auprès de presque toutes les familles yazidies de Calgary (45 familles, dont 241 membres de la famille), nous nous concentrons sur quatre aspects clés :

- 1_ La restructuration du programme de réinstallation par la CCIS pour répondre aux besoins des femmes et des hommes yazidis, mais surtout des femmes ;
- 2_ Le réajustement des services de santé par genre à la clinique pour réfugiés ;
- 3_ Des dispositions de prise en charge dans les familles des Yazidis qui étaient assurées par des prestataires de soins féminins (au sein des familles et à l'extérieur) ; et
- 4_ Les résultats scolaires des enfants des familles yazidies, selon le genre ou non. Nous soutenons que la prise en compte des besoins sexospécifiques de la communauté yazidi dans les services de réinstallation a entraîné une réorientation féministe des services de réinstallation et des expériences des Yazidis à Calgary.

Introduction

Despite strides made in feminist scholarship since the 1980s in studies of migration, gender remains under-accounted as the central analytical framework (Nwyan 2010). When gender analysis does make its way into migration studies, scholars often forget that gender is not the singular realm of women – it is a spectrum that includes men as well (Banerjee 2019; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Cranford 2006). This is especially true in studies that are centered on refugees. Gender in refugee studies becomes a trope for studying the victimization of women and children often lumped together. And yet, research shows that the resettlement process of refugees, especially at the level of Non-Governmental Organizations, is structured by the disparate social, cultural and health needs of men and women (Cheung & Phillimore 2017; Koyama 2014; Nawyn 2010; Saheb Javaher 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2019). The differential needs of women and men in a refugee community are often dictated by the circumstance of their “refugeeness” and the contexts of their transition into a new country. The Yazidi refugees who were resettled in Canada since 2016 are no different, though the recency of the trauma experienced by the community prior to migration has created specific gendered needs among Yazidi refugees.

The Yazidis are an ethno-religious minority – a non-Muslim minority in a Muslim-majority region – who have lived primarily in Sinjar in Northern Iraq and in Syria, Turkey, Iran, and were recently forced to migrate to Australia, Canada, and Germany, primarily to flee the genocide that began in 2014 perpetrated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or Daesh (its Arabic acronym). The Yazidis were left deeply scarred by the genocide, in which most of the men were killed, women and girls were tortured, raped, and taken captive, young boys were turned into child soldiers, and children were separated from parents. Since 2016, the Canadian government has accepted approximately 1,400 ISIS victims, most of whom are Yazidi² (MacLean 2019; Wilkinson et al. 2019). Many of those who came to Canada were

2 According to the Canadian House of Commons (2018) official report on Yazidis, the number of resettled ISIS victims is 1,200, and this is consistent with most available news articles; however, from more recent media and personal sources we know that the number today is approximately 1,400.

single-parent mothers with children. The families were resettled in four cities in Canada, including Calgary, the site of focus in this chapter. The local resettlement agency, Calgary Catholic Immigration Society (CCIS), specializing in resettlement and integration services, was in charge of resettling about 265 Yazidi refugees (53 family units) in Calgary under the Survivors of Daesh program.

This article focuses on how various parts of the Yazidi resettlement process required reorienting services for the community as per their gendered needs – needs that were expressed by members of the community themselves. We focus on four key aspects:

- 1_ Restructuring of the resettlement program by CCIS to meet the needs of Yazidi women and men;
- 2_ Readjusting healthcare needs according to gender at the main refugee clinic in Calgary;
- 3_ The description of care provisions in the Yazidi families, as shaped by women care providers; and
- 4_ Gendered and un-gendered educational outcomes for the children in Yazidi families.

It should be noted that the account of resettlement and health services are based respectively on experiences of CCIS staff/managers and doctors at the clinic. The description of care provisions and educational outcomes and an overall gender analysis of the resettlement as observed in the community is based on in-depth interviews conducted by University of Calgary researchers as part of a SSHRC funded research, with nearly all Yazidi families in Calgary (45 families that include 241 members). In the following four sections, we illustrate how the gendered needs of the community reshaped the resettlement services and outcomes among Yazidis in Calgary.

CCIS Reorientation of Settlement Services and Gender

The specific gender needs of Yazidi women and men differ vastly. This was apparent to our CCIS team prior to their arrival in Calgary. Due to a variety of factors relating to the ethno-religious orientation of this population, some prevailing gender norms, and the differences in gender experiences during the genocide (particularly for those who had been in captivity), CCIS had to tailor its services to meet the unique needs of each gender.

The team created a three-year plan for the Yazidis, staggering the overall settlement by a year in comparison to other groups of refugees who had arrived in the past. Accommodating gender-specific needs was part of that equation and required creativity and flexibility in redesigning service delivery, a delivery that was continually improved with new learnings. Women clients, specifically those who had been in captivity, or who were in Canada as single women or single mothers, were assigned women caseworkers, some of whom spoke their native language, Kurmanji. Yazidi women developed trust and rapport with these caseworkers and connected with them quickly, building overall confidence in the organization as a whole. CCIS requested of the Refugee Health Clinic in Calgary (called Mosaic) that, wherever possible, Yazidi men and women be matched with family doctors of the same gender. The community members were also vocal in expressing their needs, and the women also requested a particular Kurmanji-speaking caseworker from CCIS to serve as an interpreter at almost all their medical appointments. As she was Yazidi herself, the presence of this caseworker instilled trust and provided comfort during doctor and specialist visits. Short-term crisis counselling with female therapists and interpreters was also offered, which helped the Yazidi women to work through initial trauma. Those who required longer-term therapy were also connected with therapists of the same gender.

In relation to housing, CCIS moved away from the usual practice of spreading clients across the city and instead housed the Yazidis in three neighbourhoods in Calgary. This was guided by the needs of the single women and mothers whose families lacked a support system and had no male member of the household. Placing these women within a larger Yazidi community

facilitated support from other members of the community, particularly men who had taken on leadership roles on a voluntary basis to assist single women and mothers in the community.

In the early stages of resettlement, caseworkers also did community home visits, rotating among various homes to perform group check-ins and follow-ups. This made it easier for women and men to communicate their specific needs on a regular basis without having to travel to the CCIS office.

CCIS also restructured LINC (English language) classes to meet the needs of the women, who did not feel safe travelling downtown alone for school (without male members of the community). The clients also requested Yazidi-only LINC classes as the women were uncomfortable being in an enclosed space with outsiders, particularly Muslim Arabs (whom they identified with their oppressors). Yazidi-only classes were arranged for their first semester to allow for Yazidi women to travel to the CCIS downtown office in large groups for LINC. Yazidi women who struggled with English acquisition were also connected to in-home literacy supports via the Can Learn Society.

In addition, recreational activities were also tailored by gender. Wellness Sessions were started at the beginning of their resettlement and continued for almost two years. These sessions were tailored specifically for Yazidi women who were struggling with anxiety, depression and isolation due to their experiences of trauma from the genocide. It included breathing exercises, emotion regulation and later expanded to yoga and dance to incorporate physical health. A soccer team was created for the male Yazidi youth, whose games also served as a social activity for the older men who came out as spectators to lend support. It was more of a challenge to organize programs for Yazidi girls, who were less vocal in their desire for recreation, though CCIS continued offering focus groups and various weekly activities including sports, dance and craft.

When the organization started monthly educational orientations for the community as a whole, we learned from the first session that the women were less open and vocal in their participation when the men were present. Men and women were then separated into separate sessions in these orientations. A significant increase in vocal participation from the women in the community was noticed in women-only orientations.

In 2019, the Government of Alberta leased a large piece of land to CCIS for five years which CCIS directed toward clients with trauma as a way of creating an opportunity for healing by connecting with nature. The land was named “Land of Dreams” and has since been an integral piece in addressing the mental health needs of the Yazidi community. Working on this vast piece of land, in the individual plots assigned to community members, has resulted in a significant improvement in the mental and physical health of community members. Farming activities remind the Yazidis of their homeland in Iraq as they lived in an agricultural setting. Working on the farm resulted in a reduction of psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES) among women who suffered from PTSD. Working on the land for many hours a few times a week also served as a social activity for many of the Yazidi women, who built a strong camaraderie while out onsite, reminiscing about happy memories of their homeland.

Employment is still proving to be a challenge due to language barriers and family responsibilities within the community, which CCIS continues to work on. Although some men and the younger women have managed to secure seasonal part-time jobs, many of the older women have been unable to do so due to a lack of English acquisition, lack of childcare as well as strongly ingrained beliefs of not being able to be breadwinners. CCIS’s current goal with the women is to focus on their employability and to build up feelings of confidence and competence in the skills that they already possess.

Research on refugee resettlement has sporadically focused on how gender plays a role in resettlement services. Most research has focused either on gendered labour or victimhood among refugee women (Nawyn 2010) but, very few researchers have explored the gendered needs of refugee groups within the framework of the resettlement program as a whole.

The firsthand experiences of CCIS staff who helped resettle Yazidi families, recounted here, provides a deeper insight into the resettlement process. It shows that when refugee-serving NGOs are open to learning with those they serve, listening to the voices and needs of women and men as distinct groups with differential needs, the resettlement process becomes a grass-roots and feminist project instead of remaining a paternalistic and top-down service.

Working Around Issues of Gender at the Refugee Clinic

When one of our co-authors, Dr. Coakley encountered her first Yazidi family in March 2017, she thought she was prepared to welcome them into her practice at the Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic. The day before, she had attended a briefing on the history of the Yazidi community, provided by CCIS, the clinic's immigrant-serving agency partner. Among other things, Dr. Coakley had learned that the Yazidis had endured 70 genocides, including a very recent one. She quickly learned that despite her briefing, she was ill prepared to care for this population of highly traumatized women and children through her medical practice.

The first Yazidi family that came into Dr. Coakley's office for their initial health assessment broke down in tears while recounting their story of trauma and loss. They were speaking in Kurmanji (the language of the Yazidis), desperate to communicate what had happened to them and their community. The mother and grandmother sat in her small examination room, gesticulating with their hands while tearfully telling their story as their young children cowered behind their mother, unsure of what would happen to them in this strange clinic. When Dr. Coakley tried to secure a Kurmanji interpreter through Language Line, the telephone-based interpretive service, she was told that there were no Kurmanji interpreters available.

It quickly became clear after these experiences that a considerable change in processes and practice was essential at the Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic if healthcare providers hoped to serve the Yazidi community. Over the next few months, the Clinic updated and altered its processes to help the newest arrivals feel safe and welcome while addressing their physical

and mental health challenges. There were five ways Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic responded to the communities' needs.

First, the Refugee Clinic found Kurmanji interpreters for the Yazidi through Language Line and immigrant-serving agencies. Initially, the Yazidi women would not trust any Kurmanji interpreter provided by Language Line. Many Yazidi women would trust only their Yazidi Kurmanji-speaking resettlement worker at the resettlement agency, CCIS. Even though the worker was not a trained interpreter, a compromise was agreed upon to use the resettlement worker as an interpreter so that the Yazidi women would feel safe during their health appointments. Over time, as they felt more secure in Canada, they accepted the interpreters provided by Language Line.

Second, because of their extensive sexual trauma and torture during their years in captivity with Daesh, most of the Yazidi women did not feel safe with male providers. Therefore, the Clinic decided to book their appointments only with women health providers. In addition, the Clinic recruited a female psychologist to join the Clinic since the existing psychologist was an Arab man, whom the Yazidi women perceived as threatening since their oppressors were Arab men.

Third, because the mental health of the Yazidi refugees was compromised by the numerous challenges to resettlement, the Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic, in collaboration with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), facilitated a series of workshops, called "Thriving Yazidi Futures". These workshops brought together immigrant-serving agencies, mental health providers, representatives from the board of education, community associations, faith-based groups, the City of Calgary, and most importantly, representatives from the Yazidi community. The goal of the workshops was to empower the Yazidi women and their community to identify their needs and to generate solutions for those needs. Another goal of the workshops was to enhance the capacity of Calgary's social agencies and education system to address the Yazidi community's needs over the medium and long term in order to optimize their settlement outcomes.

Fourth, because of the need for many of the women to be reunited with their families, the providers at the Mosaic Refugee Health Clinic helped them write advocacy letters to the federal government requesting family reunification. By helping the Yazidi women advocate for themselves, trust and rapport was established which then enabled the providers to offer mental health services.

In the same ways that CCIS readjusted programming to accommodate the gendered needs of the Yazidis, the Mosaic Refugee Clinic also recognized the context and culture-based health needs of the Yazidis, particularly Yazidi women, and continues to change its programs to serve the community better. The clinic has partnered with CMHA to restructure mental health services for Yazidis and Yazidi women. The steps taken by Mosaic and CCIS, recognizing that their existing services fell short, have contributed to creating a more inclusive and feminist service orientation. They have also amplified the voices and needs of the Yazidi women emerging in their resettled lives from a history of extreme oppression.

Research by the authors at the University of Calgary, considered in this next section, illustrates the importance of recognizing gender as a key aspect of Yazidi resettlement experiences in Calgary.

Women as Bearers of Care in Yazidi Resettlement

Several studies touch on the importance of resources and needs that are beyond refugees' basic needs – housing, employment, health services, language which are social, personal, and emotional in nature (Beiser 2006; Bergeron and Potter 2006; Danso 2002; McKeary and Newbold 2010; Simich et al. 2003; Simich et al. 2010). The extant literature refers to such resources as social/personal support and/or as social resources. For newcomers, the definition of social support generally revolves around the receiving of some form of assistance that eases the resettlement process (Stewart et al. 2008:140; Agrawal and Zeitouny 2017; Banerjee, Chacko and Piya 2020).

These include support or help received from professional and non-professional networks and individuals that offer assistance by providing information, guidance and advice, emotional support, advocacy, and more (Danso 2002; Simich et al. 2005; Bergeron and Potter 2006:76; Miraftab 2000).

The portrayed reliance of refugees in Canada on social and personal support during their resettlement process highlights the significance of caregiving and care provision in the success of refugee resettlement in the country. For refugees, building and maintaining social and personal networks are necessary acts of survival because they enable them to navigate financial challenges as well as emotional and mental ones. Research has shown that these caregiving resources and networks are often maintained and sustained by women both within and outside of the refugee community in question, at least for the Yazidi community in Calgary (Lamba and Krahn 2003; Spitzer 2006:49 – 51; Saheb Javaher 2020). Research by Saheb Javaher focused on the care that is provided and received by Yazidi refugee women, women CCIS staff assigned to the Yazidi resettlement services, and women Family Host³ volunteers.

In the resettlement of Yazidi refugee families in Calgary, women take on caregiving roles as:

- Maternal figures at home within Yazidi refugee families;
- Canadian Family Host volunteers as family and friends to Yazidi refugee community; and
- Staff working at the resettlement agency.

3 The Host program, formally called “Community Connections for Newcomers” (CCNC) program at CCIS however in conversations with CCIS staff and Yazidi refugee families, they are referred to as Family Hosts which is the term I will use. The program was established by Immigration, Refugees, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (IRCC), then called Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in 1984, is a volunteer-based program where each newcomer family is “matched” with a Canadian “Host” family in order to enhance the newcomers’ resettlement and integration experience (Wang and Truelove 2003:578; Government of Canada 2010; Lutaba 2017).

For this analysis, we focus specifically on data from women actors partly because women are overrepresented in the data: the Yazidi refugee family population in Calgary consists predominantly of women and girls. In the entire Yazidi refugee population in Calgary and in this study, there are 72 adult Yazidi women compared to 52 adult males, and 91 girls below the age of 18 compared to 60 male counterparts. Women are also overrepresented among CCIS staff members who work closely with Yazidi refugee families (out of the 11 interviewees, seven are women including the resettlement centre's manager and four are male – at least an additional five women in CCIS staff roles have been identified as key agents in the resettlement of Yazidi refugees but weren't interviewed). The same over-representation of women is found among Yazidi Family Host volunteers – 83 percent of Family Host volunteers are women. The over-representation of women among staff and volunteers is by design, as discussed earlier.

The presence of women in this study in caregiving roles also reifies the gendered nature of caregiving, often associated with being a woman/mother – as seen in the relationships between the women in various roles involved in this study. For instance, women in the homes were maternal figures to each other, CCIS staff took on the role of older sisters and Family Host volunteers often assumed grandmotherly roles.

The Yazidi refugee maternal figures worked tirelessly to compensate for the vacuum in care created by the absence of familial figures such as fathers, siblings, and grandparents in the household, to help the families adapt to life in Calgary. Whether it was creating happy moments for their families or managing multiple medical appointments where there were language and transportation limitations, Yazidi refugee mothers/sisters offered themselves as resources while also seeking out external resources. They often tried to work around their lingering trust issues stemming from past trauma and actively reach out to CCIS staff and Family Hosts for help, important resources for managing their resettlement process.

CCIS staff who have been working with the community closely, regardless of gender and position, have generally gone beyond their job descriptions and have used the same

approach in their personal interactions and service provision to the Yazidi community. However, there were nuances to the extent of going “beyond.” The women staff at CCIS who were assigned to the Yazidi community effectively became extended caregivers. Our research found that the gaps in funding or programming for the resettlement of Yazidi refugees in Calgary were filled by the efforts of these women who took their roles beyond their job descriptions. The additional care necessary for the resettlement of Yazidis as a community suffering from intense trauma were taken on by the women volunteers who acted as Family Hosts. They became grandmothers, aunts and friends to the families. Yazidi families we interviewed who had close relationships with the Family Host described them as part of their Canadian families who made their transition to Canada easier.

These efforts in care provision – women filling the gaps in institutional resettlement resources, including Yazidi refugee women helping their families, or staff and Family Hosts assisting their clients – have made the resettlement of Yazidi refugees possible in Calgary, Canada. Given the importance of this type of work done by women, which largely remains invisible in resettlement work, we call for a closer look into the nuances of social and personal caregiving shouldered by women, because it is essential work in the realm of resettlement processes.

Gender and the Educational Experiences of School-Aged Yazidi Refugee Children

Beyond the care provision, the resettlement study of Yazidis in Calgary also explored the educational experiences of resettled school-aged Yazidi refugee youth (14 years and older), specifically the gendered differences in parental and self-expectations with regards to educational goals. Most of the Yazidi refugee population has received no formal schooling in their home country due to the lack of adequate educational infrastructure in Yazidi villages in Iraq, as Yazidi areas were the last in the country to receive new schools due to the geopolitics of the region (Maisel, 2008, p. 5). The majority of our research participants were living in these

areas before the genocide. As a result, education was largely denied to many children in such communities for generations.

Education is an essential tool for integration and socialization (Yixian & Huizhen, 1987). The literature on the educational experiences of refugee populations is very limited as there is little “empirical and theoretical work on the topic” (Pinson & Arnot, 2007, p. 399). Our study is one of a handful exploring issues of education, resettlement and gender. The central question we focused on was, “Is there a gendered difference in parental and self-expectations with regards to the educational goals of school-aged Yazidi refugee children?”

We found that regardless of the gender of their children, all parents wanted their children to continue their education. There was no mention of gendered goals for their children, which is particularly interesting given the defined gendered expectations espoused by many of our participants within families. The parents stated that they wanted their children to have better futures, but with no specification as to what careers they wanted for their children. Two of the mothers stated that they had not thought about this before; this is important to note as many families did not have strong explicit future goals, as their minds were focused on the safety and reunification of their family members. This may change as the families progress in the resettlement process, and families are reunited. One mother had the following response:

“We wish for our children to graduate and do some programs at the university so they can get jobs... [and] help sponsor our son who is still in Iraq.”

For this mother, the goal of education for children was so they could help their families still in Iraq as opposed to any explicit gendered goals.

In terms of career aspirations of the youth, there were no apparent gendered differences. This was particularly interesting as the previous generations of Yazidi people customarily

upheld traditional gender roles. When asked about career aspirations, young boys and girls cited occupations that were diverse in nature and did not conform to gendered roles.

For example, several young girls aspired to become police officers, doctors and one cited wanting to become the Prime Minister of Canada. The boys cited wanting to become painters and physical education teachers. Evidently, daughters did not aspire to be like their mothers, which is an interesting finding given that there was not the same form of interdependence rooted in career goals between the generations, as cited in the academic literature on this topic (Wagner, 2013). It should be noted that the Yazidi “cultural and religious practices do not restrict women from acquiring an education and playing an active role in both financial and family decisions” (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada 2017, p. 10). The analysis indicates that in terms of the school-aged youth’s educational-attainment goals, as a whole, the participants wanted to pursue post-secondary education regardless of gender. All but one young man cited desiring to attend post-secondary education.

Overall, educational aspirations and outcomes of Yazidi youth and parents were not highly gendered, which is different than most other immigrant and refugee groups as well as white Canadian families. This is a crucial finding that requires further inquiry as resettlement efforts should ensure that educational expectations among Yazidis remain de-gendered given the unequal outcomes of gendered aspirations for the life chances of girls and women (Fuller 2009).

Conclusion

A larger finding from the study in Calgary on Yazidi resettlement indicates that women in women-only and women-headed households are integrating at a faster rate than women in families with men as heads of households. This differential integration is to a certain extent a function of the resilience of Yazidi women. However, the efforts of CCIS and Mosaic in incorporating the needs and requirements of the Yazidi in their service programming cannot be underestimated. Both organizations restructured their programming to listen to the voices of women in the community.

This sends a message to the community and the women that they are valued and that their voices are important in the resettlement process. The nurturing work that CCIS staff, the Mosaic doctors and volunteers extended to the community, particularly the single mothers and women, also creates a sense of care-laden empowerment.

The women took on tasks that they never thought they were capable of. This reorientation of resettlement as women-focused may also explain the fact that we did not see gendered aspirations among the Yazidi youth and parents. Centring the gender-based needs of the Yazidi community in the resettlement services has resulted in a resettlement program that is feminist and inclusive. It is important to recognize this and value the invisible work being done by so many women in the efforts to successfully resettle Yazidis in Calgary.

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