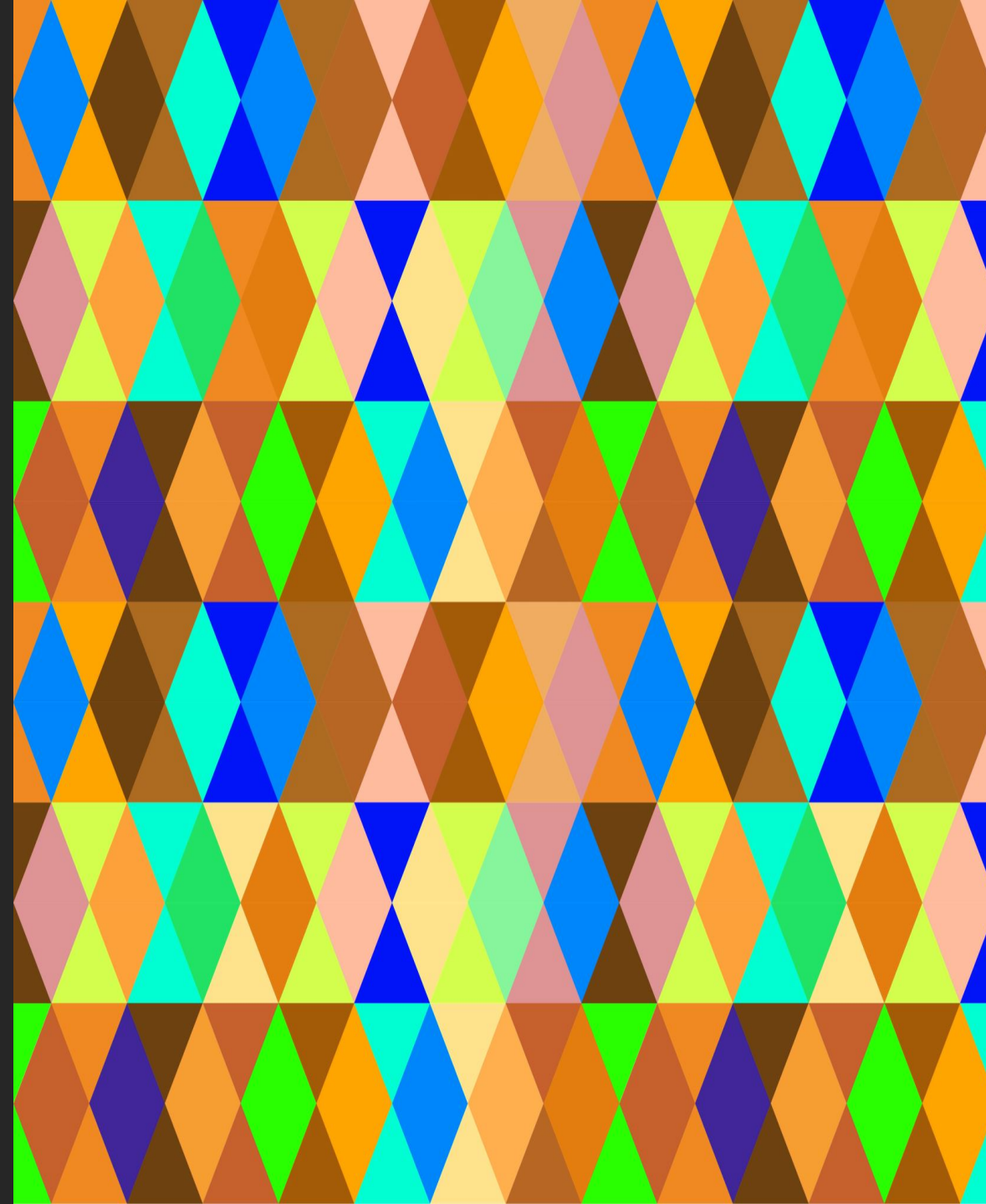


# Family Reunification: A Social Resilience Approach to Integration



Stéfanie Morris  
University of Ottawa  
Common Law, JD Candidate 2023

Dr. Patti Tamara Lenard  
University of Ottawa  
Graduate School of Public & International  
Affairs, Associate Professor



# How does Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and family reunification affect social resilience?

Current pathways for family reunification are inadequate and, for some refugees, this reduces social resilience.

# Social Resilience Approach

- Social resilience (Hall & Lamont 2013) → an outcome in which the members of a group have the social, economic, cultural, etc. resources to sustain their well-being in the face of challenges to it (Hall & Lamont)
- Well-being includes:
  - Physical and psychological health
  - Material sustenance
  - A sense of belonging

# Research Methods

Fall 2017, semi-structured interviews with:

- 34 Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs)
- 17 Government Assisted Refugees (GARs)
- 54 Sponsors (18 PSR sponsors; 23 BVOR sponsors; and 13 that have participated in both PSR and BVOR)

# Outline

- Context of refugee family resettlement in Canada
- Family separation as a barrier to resilience
  - Family reunification as a resource for resilience
- Conclusions

# Separation

Very limited family definition:

- Married or common-law partners
- Dependent children
- Children of dependent children

Formal pathways for reunification:

- None for refugee family members outside of this definition

# Reunification

Informal options:

- Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program
- Family Class (Parents, grandparents, orphaned minor family members)
- Hope that they come as GARs

# Family separation as a barrier to resilience

- Family separation is identified by many refugees (and their sponsors) as a challenge to well-being (and therefore) resilience in three major areas:
  - Psychological and physical health
  - Material sustenance
  - Sense of dignity and belonging

# 1. Psychological & Physical Health - Separation

Depression, worry, etc.

- Man from Syria: “It is causing a lot of stress and unrest in our lives and that is why I feel like I am not able to comfortably settle down.”

Putting off medical procedures:

- “My husband needs to do a heart surgery but he refuses to undergo surgery. He wants his children to be around him just as much as I do. I was supposed to do a discectomy surgery 8 months ago and I also refused to undergo it because who will take care of the younger kids?” (Woman from Syria)



# 1. Physical & Psychological Health - Reunification

Increased happiness and less worry

- “An enormous weight off them”
- “They are very happy”
- “A completely different story”

Support during hard times

- PSR woman from Syria: “Last month, my daughter was admitted to hospital and I was so worried about her and the sponsors asked me what could help me and I told them if some of my extended family members here in Canada.”

## 2. Material Sustenance - Separation

Missed opportunities:

- Woman from Syria: “If they are here with us, we could have opened up a business or started something but at the moment we cannot think straight. We are not sure that we will remain here - I will pursue any opportunity that will allow me to reconnect with my sisters.”

Remittances:

- Private sponsor: “Yes, since they got here and that was one of the things that the father said about wanting to work right away. And we kept saying no, because you need to learn English. But after a few months he did get a part-time job where there was limited English but he knew enough that he could do... it was stacking shelves overnight. But he could do English classes the next day. But yeah, from the moment they got here there was some money being sent. Because it’s hard to live in Lebanon.”

## 2. Material Sustenance - Reunification

Support with job searching, finances, etc.

- Private sponsor: “The other thing is that they have connections and they say oh well my brother-in-law can work here... So even just the logistics of working, its a big help because they have someone on the inside with the language and the customs already.”

# 3. Sense of Belonging - Separation

- Isolation, cultural differences, language barriers...
  - Talking about and sharing common experiences
  - Celebrations, customs, religious expression, etc.

# 3. Sense of Belonging - Reunification

- Sense of shared cultural practices, shared experiences, family gathering, emotional support, etc.
  - Private sponsor: “The men would sit around smoking, talking and laughing. The women would be here in the kitchen in the summertime. The windows open. You could hear them laughing and singing. The men were there quite content to be out there. And they are very young and social.”

# Family Reunification is a resource for social resilience

- Family reunification strengthens resilience in ways that both refugees and private sponsors recognize as extremely important.
- If this is the case, Canada should recognize its value and create more equitable avenues for reunification.
- Overcoming one challenge (i.e. family separation) boosts a person's ability to take on future integration challenges

# Policy Recommendations

Stéfanie Morris, Patti Tamara Lenard, Stacey Haugen, Refugee Sponsorship and Family Reunification, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2020

- <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/jrs/feaa062/6056578?redirectedFrom=fulltext>