



ACWW Out and About

What ACWW Member Societies are up to around the world

Women in Canada Support Refugees

Content Warning: The following article discusses conflict, sexual violence, and loneliness.

Faridah Chishiti shares her experience settling refugees in Prince Edward Island with UN Committee Chairman, Marie Kenny

“During the Afghan crisis, Muslim Society of PEI got involved with sponsoring refugees. MSPEI co-sponsored a few families in collaboration with the church organization as we were not a Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) organization at that time. (A Sponsorship Agreement Holder is an incorporated organization that has signed an agreement with the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to resettle refugees from abroad through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme.)

I was asked to coordinate this as I had previous experience in the settlement of Kosovo families in the early 1990s. Once I had the full information about the families, I formed a committee of a few women and started organizing activities. We raised funds through yard sales, fundraising dinners, and in-kind donations from the local community. I furnished the apartment with beds, furniture, clothes, household things and other accessories. Through e-mails the response from the community was very positive. For my work with refugees I was awarded a national citizenship award in 2005 by Government of Canada. We have sponsored many refugees from Libya, Iraq, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Somalia.

I learned the plight of these refugees from the internet, newspapers and TV news. I found how resilient they were in their survival in refugee camps. After listening to their horror stories I realized they were not happy in leaving their homeland and coming to a completely new cultural environment. It takes a long time to adjust to settling in a new country. One family would not live in a basement apartment as in their opinion it was like a prison. We had to gain their trust but it was very hard for them to trust the sponsors. The question always came “Why are you doing this for total strangers?”

One has to take into consideration that these families are migrating to a new country where they do not even speak the language and they are leaving behind their own freedom and comfort just because of power hungry politicians and leaders. One thing I learned was never to discuss their miseries unless they opened their heart, once they gained confidence in the sponsors, it was a different story.

One has to consider all aspects of migrating families and make sure that there are some community members of their country as they will be lonely without their loved ones. They need to be comfortable and have a shoulder to cry upon which makes the adjustment period tolerable. This is a human catastrophe, a violation of human rights in their own country where they were

born and raised, spent their life time and now they are uprooted and exposed to a completely new cultural environment, especially for those who held status in their homeland. They feel impotent and helpless as men are the breadwinners and they cannot provide the basic livelihood for their families. Their qualifications are not recognized, they cannot work in their own profession and have to do menial or odd jobs, which is below their dignity. This causes mental anguish and problems in the family at home. They miss family visits, which were a feature of daily life in their homeland. In Canadian culture you only visit on weekends and by calling first. The refugee families feel guests are blessing, and miss that aspect of community life.

One aspect I believe is overlooked is the specific case of single mothers and raped women who have suffered trauma and seen death with their own eyes. These files should be expedited and their cases taken up specially by UNHCR.”



Faridah Chishiti

UNHCR is the UN Agency responsible for assisting and supporting refugees. They seek to ensure that migration management meets the needs of refugees and they coordinate settlement with receiving countries. However, they rely heavily on the work of local organisations like Muslim Society of PEI. ACWW Member organisations are specially equipped to support refugees, as the network already in place can serve as a community for these transplanted families. Rural women understand the issue of loneliness and isolation, and while rural areas might not be a hub for refugee settlement, rural women can support the networks that are already in place and ensure that their governments have created and are maintaining policy that looks after the needs of refugees, especially refugee women.

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One family that Faridah helped to settle is the Fazli family. Below, Sarah shares her experience as a refugee

How have you found the experience of settling into a new community?

After leaving my country I first went to Pakistan, where I received a warm welcome and the people were friendly and helpful. Then I went to Tashkent and later on to Turkey. My impression was not that good as people were not friendly and hospitable. I had a hard time in adjusting as there were many restrictions. Since I have come to Canada, I am very happy and relaxed as my sponsors were very kind and accommodating.

How do you think women specifically can support refugees?

Women are emotional and they understand problems better than men. The community was very cooperative and they fulfilled our needs. It is very hard to explain as to how I feel when my half of the family is still in camps and suffering. We live in a combined family system. I will be happy only when we are all together. Even though I feel as I am in heaven but I still suffer the pain of loneliness.

What do you want ACWW Members to remember when working with refugees in their own Communities?

One should understand the culture of the families. Refugees should have access to needed resources (such as medical, travel etc.) required by the refugee application process while staying/living in the cities/ or country. There is extra cost of exit visa, so settling in a new country can have financial implications for refugees.



If you have experience of working with refugees, please tell us about it. We want to know how ACWW members are working on the 2016 ACWW Resolution on Refugees, or what support you need in order to work on this resolution in your area. Get in touch, make your voice heard.