

Voices of Syrian Men

Employment and Integration in Canada

Photo by Kefah:

“This photo expresses that displacement of my people with one difference between the situations ... that these birds fly in the blue sky. But what about the rest of my family and friends? One of the most difficult difficulties here in Canada is that one of us [must] take care of himself and his family here and their families that are still suffering? [...] They (the birds) choose to go, they planned. They have a plan But when we fly, when we go out (of our) country, no one of us have this plan. Everything is surprise us...”

A digital storybook

November, 2023

Introduction

“ I believe here in Canada here, I'm always under pressure, always ”

Nedal

Did you know? Employment is a social determinant of mental health. According to the Affiliation of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies of BC (2019), being unemployed or underemployed can have unique effects on men and their identity. Poor self-image among refugee men and the failure to secure employment pose risk to men's mental health.

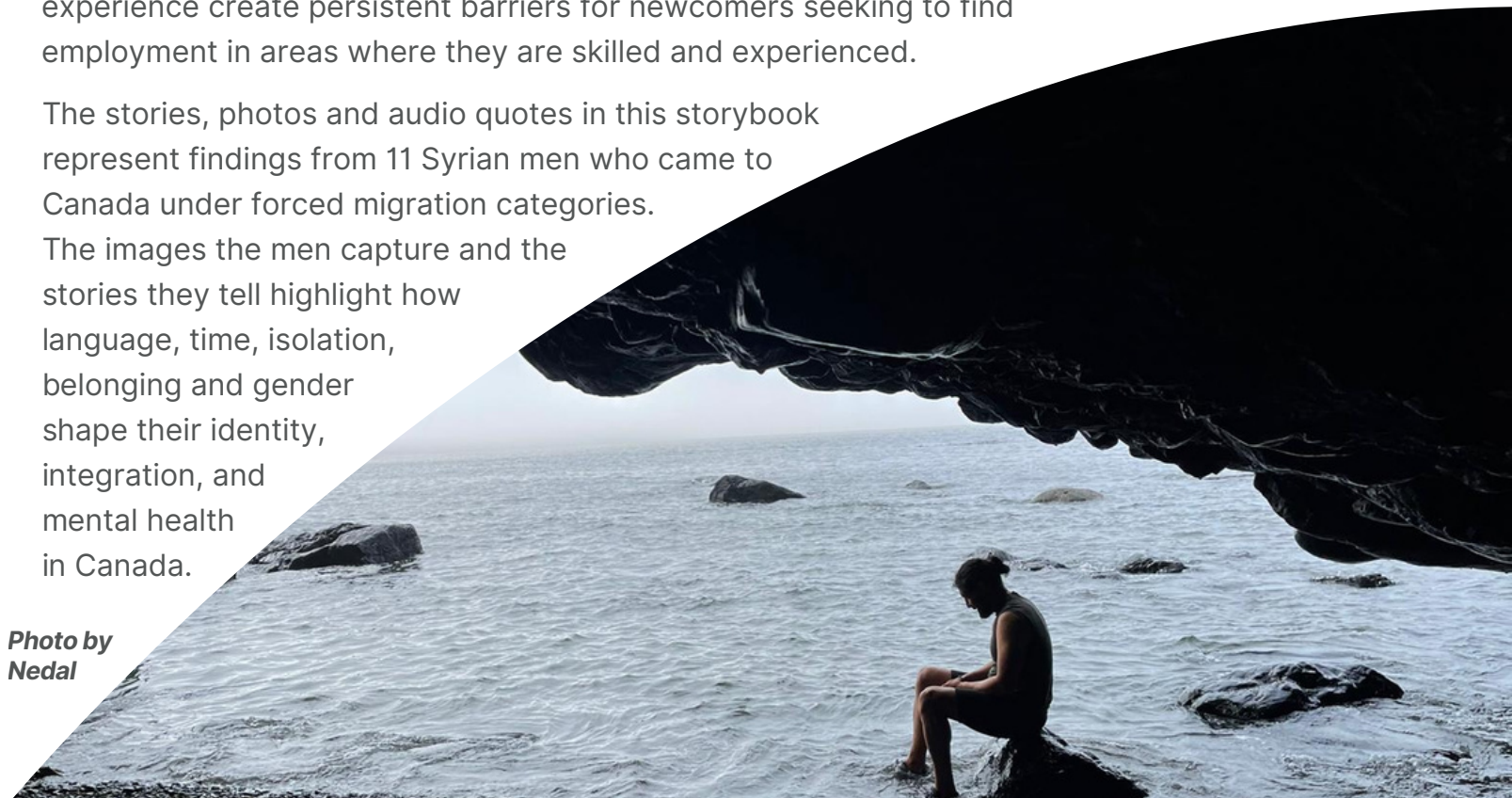
To date, little research attention has focused on the mental health of refugee men in Canada and the gendered effects of migration and resettlement. This storybook provides a window into Syrian men's experiences. It offers calls to action and practical considerations for employers, settlement service providers, industry associations, and workforce development counsellors on practices that support inclusive employment development and integration.

Did you know? In a survey of 6,400+ skilled immigrants to Canada, World Education Services (2019) research found that less than half (47.2%) were working in the same sector as they were pre-migration. Industry and employer requirements related to certification and Canadian experience create persistent barriers for newcomers seeking to find employment in areas where they are skilled and experienced.

The stories, photos and audio quotes in this storybook represent findings from 11 Syrian men who came to Canada under forced migration categories.

The images the men capture and the stories they tell highlight how language, time, isolation, belonging and gender shape their identity, integration, and mental health in Canada.

**Photo by
Nedal**



Language

Taleb's story and photo

After several setbacks during his migration journey from Syria to Canada, Taleb finally arrived and the future felt hopeful. However, Taleb was unable to find work that would provide for him and his family. His primary barrier was English language skills but Taleb had to work as soon as he arrived in Canada so he was unable to take any time to learn English. Taleb became trapped in low-paying jobs or seasonal work that required long hours in jobs where he did not have opportunities to communicate with others. Learning English became near impossible.

Working hard to provide for his family and spending time with his friends gives Taleb a sense of purpose and belonging. But Taleb needs more opportunities to learn English so that he can develop new relationships, learn about Canadian society, and find meaningful work so he can provide for his family.

Insights from the research

- **Research by Hassan and colleagues (2016) on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians showed that refugee men are less likely than women to complete Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes, a finding which may be related to the gendered pressure to earn an income.**
- **English language skills are a significant barrier for the men in the project. Most men arrived with minimal English language proficiency and found it difficult to attend English language classes because of working hours.**
- **Men who are older find it harder to find jobs due to lower English language skills and may not have the technological skills required for jobs that they had previously done in Syria.**

"I want to improve myself in order to work. I cannot improve myself until I learn the language and understand the rules and work...." Taleb

[Link to Audio](#)

Language

- The men collectively voiced that they work in lower paying jobs that do not require English language skills (E.g., food delivery) and that there are few opportunities to communicate with others. It is difficult for many to learn the English language skills required to secure higher paying jobs or jobs in their related professions.
- Syrian men value conversation and opportunities to engage and see building language skills as related to having social relationships and opportunities for communication on the job.

Hamed's photo

"I am always looking to develop myself and grow in my field...even though it might be beyond my ability I need to be patient.... I am looking for a better opportunity"



[Hamed's audio clip](#)



Hazaa's photo

"When your language is limited, it makes you vulnerable ... I looked for work a lot and tried working. If one's language is minimal "half in half" or less, then you are exposed to everything, exploitation, and persecution."



[Hazaa's audio clip](#)





Photo by Hamed

Calls to action: Language



The Immigrant Employment Council of BC recommends that when evaluating immigrant candidates, consider all forms of communication skills for them to demonstrate their English language skills, e.g., reading materials, writing, and speaking.



Provide opportunities for conversation and socializing in English with other employees.



Support men in attending LINC or other language classes by offering flexible working hours when possible, and checking in with how they are feeling about their progress in learning English.



Support cross-team collaboration or a buddy system where men can check in on work projects or tasks to ensure they understand they are on track.



Provide language interpretation & translation so that men know their rights related to health and safety, work benefits, and disability compensation.



Consider providing workplace English classes that focus on workplace language specific to your industry and culturally appropriate communication.

Time

Feras' story and photo


After a prolonged migrant journey from his childhood home of Syria, Feras arrived in Canada and soon learned that his accounting credentials were not recognized. He had to take on different jobs to provide for his family and had to put his professional life as a Chartered Professional Accountant (CPA) on hold.

Eventually, Feras was able to find an accounting program through WorkBC. While in the program he was asked by his teachers why he was taking these courses as he was receiving 100% on every exam. It seemed like a waste of time, but Feras needed his accounting certificate if he was ever going to resume his professional career.

Feras has had to face many obstacles. He remembers his family and friends he left behind in Syria and those who did not survive. Despite the trauma and disruptions, Feras continues to study every day in the hopes of becoming a CPA here in Canada so he can provide for his family here and back in Syria.

Insights from the research

- **The average age of men in the project is 40. They arrived with extensive backgrounds in architecture, civil engineering, art, dentistry, and entrepreneurship.**
- **Not having the Canadian experience many employers ask for places them in a process of 'de-skilling' – taking survival jobs where they are not able to utilize their skills or experience, or 'credentialing' – evaluating and upgrading education and skills. Requiring Canadian experience creates additional obstacles in an already long, arduous process, and most often prevents men from returning to their careers at all.**



***"In Canada I don't know why you need to start from zero, you have to go to school to get a grade certification....
I can't find a job because I need to upgrade [but] I don't have time because I have other expenses... it's very expensive here..."***
Feras

[**Link to Audio**](#)

Time

- Many men took photographs as they were going or coming from work - late in the night or early in the morning, catching the sunset, sunrise or the weather conditions - representing their long, irregular hours and shift work.
- They expressed concern with the sense of time passing. Prolonged migrant journeys, the constant pressures of building a life in Canada for their families, needing to re-certify in their professions, and feeling insecure due to lack of a social safety net all contribute to discomfort with the passing of time.

Nedal's photo

It's very hard for me because I can't feel that I'm normal person. ... I start my work at four and finish at midnight ... here in Canada I'm always under pressure, always you need to think about surviving...



[Nedal's audio clip](#)



Nazir's photo

It's really scary to think about the future ... starting from middle age and losing 20-25 years of the pension is a factor that changed the game of retirement.



[Nazir's audio clip](#)

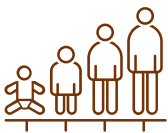


Photo by Hazaa

Calls to action: Time



Avoid relying on Canadian experience. Instead, ask about international education, experience and skills, as men may be able to adapt and build new skills related to their jobs.



Adopt a generational lens in employment-oriented service delivery and expectations. Younger men may have technical skills to be leveraged, while older men hold experiential knowledge.



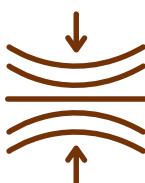
Allow for time, space, and experiences for building cultural understanding. Syrian men may need more time to understand the work culture. Some Syrian men may also need cultural accommodations, e.g. spaces to pray.



Consider other accommodation needs. Some Syrian men come with trauma and other injuries and disabilities from previous work or hardships.



Consider mentorship, apprenticeship or co-op opportunities that support Syrian men in adapting their knowledge, skills and experiences while on the job.



Be flexible with work plans. There are many competing pressures that Syrian men are under including a need for immediate income, learning English, and providing security and stability for families within and outside of Canada.

Isolation

Diaa's story and photo


After a long journey from Syria to Lebanon, then Egypt, and finally Canada, Diaa felt he would have new opportunities in education and a pathway to his career in business here. Now Diaa finds studying and working hard gives him confidence but sometimes he is doubtful that he will reach all his goals.

Diaa reflects that one of the hardest things to overcome is loneliness. He reminisces about sitting with friends at the beach, going to cafes, and playing video games. He finds here in Canada it is hard to make friends in the community.

Despite the loneliness, Diaa works part time while completing his credits for a university transfer program and he has recently met some new people that are helping him to get a better paying job. He feels safe in Canada, and working and studying make him feel confident that eventually he will have a brighter future.

Insights from the research

- **Loneliness is a common experience amongst the men. They have been in Canada less than 5 years and miss their friends and family left behind. They also miss the social aspects of their lives before the war in Syria.**
- **Men commonly expressed the desire to build social connections both inside and outside of work**
- **Faith, family, and friends can build a sense of community and belonging.**



"I did not feel super happy or excited on the day of the flight because deep inside me I knew that the pain of leaving everyone behind outweigh the sense of excitement."

Diaa

[Link to Audio](#)

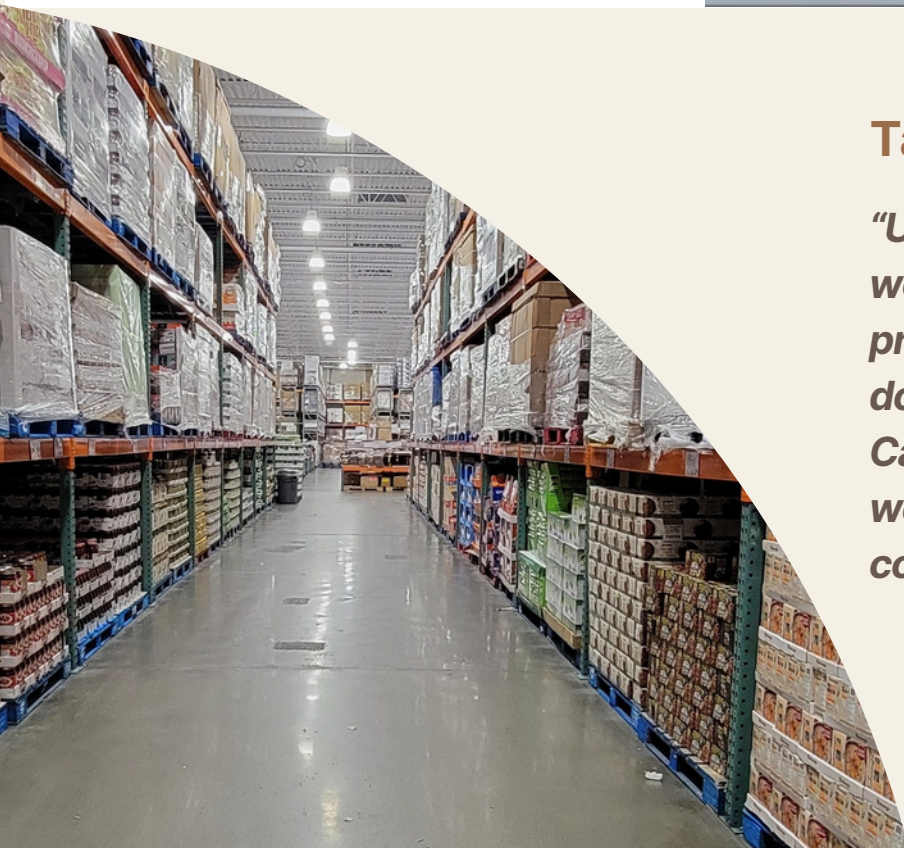
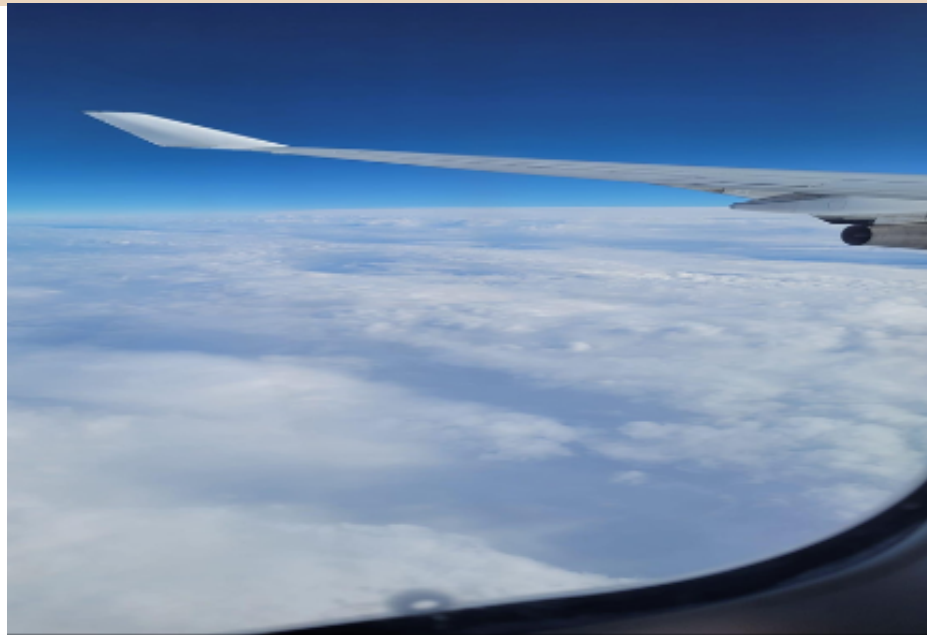
Isolation

- Men have limited access to pathways that lead them to meaningful work. While some benefitted from local settlement services, many immediately took lower-skilled jobs in order to pay the bills. These pressures were made particularly challenging in the context of COVID-19 and high inflation.
- Lack of opportunity for connection to others in the workplace contributes to the men's sense of isolation. Some feel they are treated differently by their bosses because they are not Canadian, while others feel excluded by other employees because they have accents.

Ahmad's photo

When I landed in Canada, I was alone. I was single alone... over ocean and over clouds and to somewhere, I have no idea where I'm going ...

 [Ahmad's audio clip](#)



Taleb's photo

"Unfortunately now we are forced to work any job which is causing us problem. Any job you want lets you down due to experience here in Canada. So where do we get started if we cannot access any Canadian company..."

 [Taleb's audio clip](#)



Photo by Diaa

Calls to action: Isolation



Provide Syrian men with a workplace mentor or “peer buddy” who can guide them in workplace culture, and who has expressed interest in the cultural exchanges afforded by Syrian men. Formal and informal mentoring programs support the integration of immigrant hires and promote cross-cultural understanding among all staff.



Include newcomer men in the planning and implementation of social events. This provides social connections between workers, and supports a more diverse and inclusive work environment.



Check in regularly with Syrian men to find out how they are managing their job, as well as other aspects of their lives. This can be as informal as asking how their family is, or what they did on the weekend.



Provide written material in Arabic. This ensures Syrian men understand their rights and responsibilities. It also helps men to know that their needs and wellbeing are considered, and that they are important to the work environment.

Belonging

Kefah's story and photo

After a multiple year migrant journey, Kefah and his family came to Canada through private sponsorship in 2018. On arrival they lived in a church basement. He and his wife studied English, and Kefah went back to school to re-certify as a civil engineer in Canada.

Being independent is very important to him. Finding hope and resilience is not easy when trying to rebuild a new life in Canada. It has been very stressful and many times he felt discriminated against. He just wants to be treated like everyone else.

Kefah works hard to maintain his family responsibilities, and at the same time he is exploring his new identity here as a Canadian.

Insights from the research

- **The men in the project experienced barriers they could not have anticipated. Many were unprepared and unsupported in the need to “start from scratch” at entry level jobs. Some experienced overt barriers such as discrimination and racism.**
- **Navigating unfamiliar systems is challenging and multi-faceted, including finding work and supporting families in language and education pathways and other settlement needs. Some men were challenged in finding support related to their physical injuries from manual work, while others needed to act on behalf of family members with disabilities or chronic conditions.**

“Marhaba Marhaba. This word is Aramaic word. And actually, it's two words... Mar haba, meaning God is love...”
Kefah

[Link to Audio](#)

Belonging

- Syrian men want to do what they love and what is meaningful to them. They want to be able to learn how things work in Canada and also be acknowledged for the skills and experiences they bring.
- Some had professional identities as accountants, engineers and business owners, while others talked about their identity as musicians and artists. Very few have the opportunity to work in their chosen field. For those that do, it is dependent upon various factors such as language ability, method of migration, and connecting with faith groups and other social supports such as the YMCA.

Hadi's photo

"So I'm always in that mindset like I might find a more convenient living situation somewhere else. This is a temporary place to be. So I'm always ready to go. I'm always ready to dig these boxes".



Diaa's photo

"Studying trying hard um makes me feel good makes me feel confident ...that I'm able to accomplish whatever I want..."



[Diaa's audio clip](#)

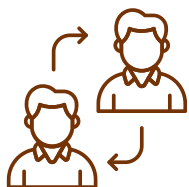


Photo by Rami

Calls to action: Belonging



Use tools like World Education Services (WES) to authenticate and evaluate international degrees and diplomas to determine their Canadian equivalencies.



Build a more inclusive, diverse workplace by learning from the experiences of Syrian men. Engage them in establishing a peer mentorship program to support immigrant hires to learn about the intangibles that are needed to succeed in the workplace and promote inter-cultural knowledge across the organization.



Provide regular check-ins with men to find out how they are managing on the job. Note their strengths and progress, and encourage their various contributions and efforts – work-related, language or perhaps their efforts to strengthen communication across a work team.



Use existing tools and resources such as the Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IECBC) for cross cultural training and leadership resources to hire and retain immigrant talent.

Men's Identity & Roles

Ahmad's story and photo

For 3 years Ahmad worked two jobs: as a line cook and on a food production line. This experience was isolating, depressing, and lonely. He couldn't learn English during this time but after he was laid off, he started online English classes.

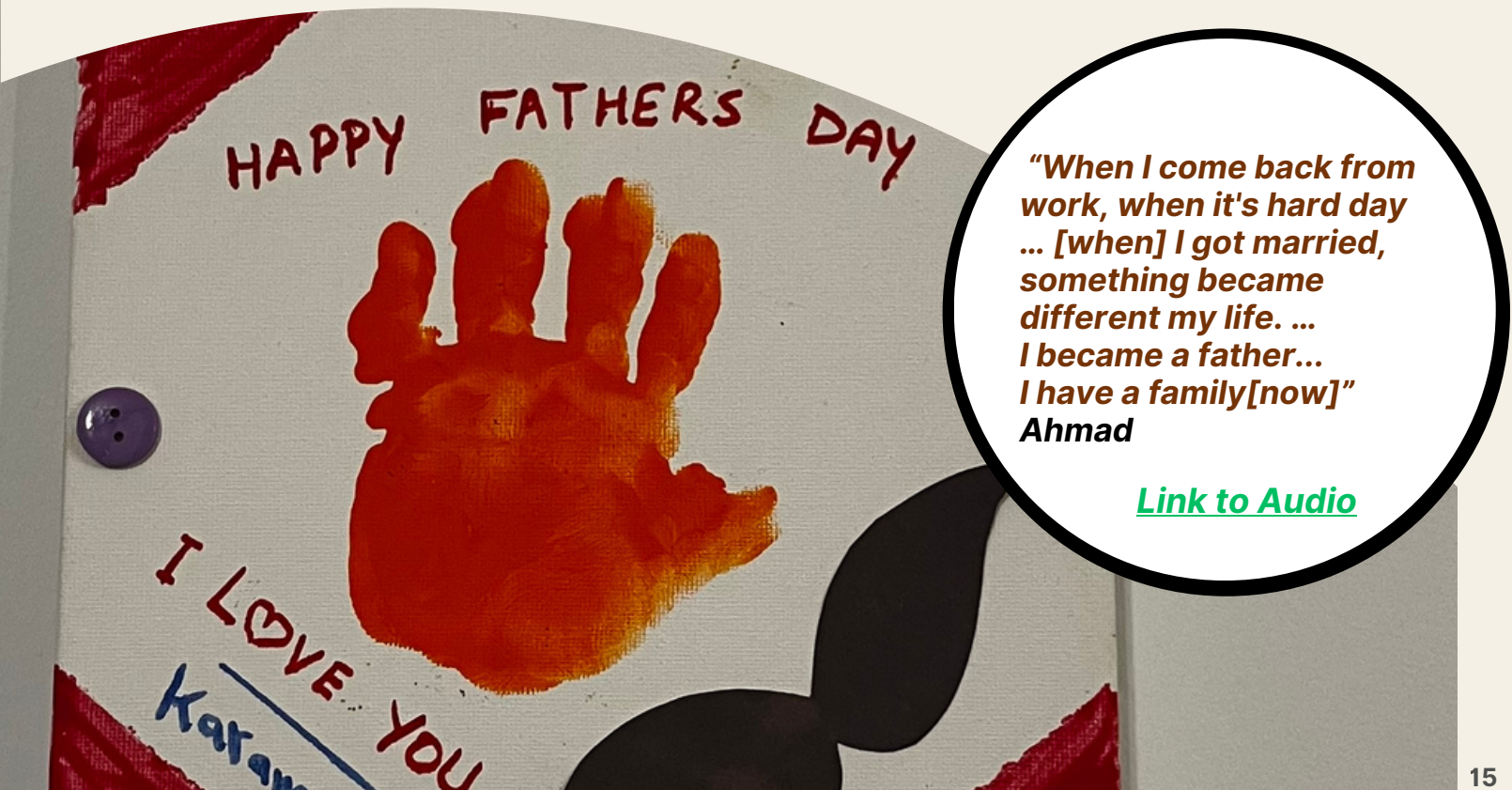
Eventually Ahmad found work as a surveyor with an engineering firm and he is grateful that he can use his knowledge and skills, and also because he can communicate in English.

In 2020, Ahmad became a father and now supports his wife who is going to school. Ahmad also uses part of his income to support his father in Syria.

Working as a surveyor requires long hours and time away from his family and new baby. Ahmad finds it very difficult to be away from his family, especially when he needs to be able to pick his son up from daycare. But he also finds new strength in being a provider and father.

Insights from the research

- **Identities such as ethnicity, gender, age, ability, migration status, employment, and religion intersect to shape experience. Understanding this can help service providers and employers create opportunities for success.**
- **Engaging men's knowledge, experience, and skills sets can be used to strengthen organizations, the labour force, and a knowledge-based economy.**



Men's Identity & Roles

- Syrian men are providers and care takers, often responsible for making sure their kids are taken to and from school. They benefit from flexible work hours, opportunities to build social connections, and support and encouragement in the work that they do.
- With a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of men, we also gain a more complete understanding about family experiences of migration and integration, and can work towards more equitable, healthy, and inclusive workplaces and communities.

Rami's photo

"[The sunsets] makes me very rich. I, my father, mother and I were here... So I was always telling them that it's good to see this..."



Hazaa's photo

"End of the day, I tried focusing on my children, and investing in them. I taught them in the hopes that they become successful members in society. This would benefit Canadian society and myself. This means so much to me..."

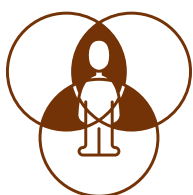
 [Hazaa's audio clip](#)





Photo by Taleb

Calls to action: Men's Identity & Roles



Learn about the Syrian men you employ and consider their identities related to gender, immigration, and labour employment.

It may be important to accommodate flexible work schedules to support men to pick up and drop off kids from school. Supporting newcomer men helps support their families.



Build and promote a knowledge-based economy by including newcomer men to develop diverse skill sets, contribute new ideas, and lead innovation. Recognize that newcomer men come to Canada at various ages with education and skills that support diverse economies - not only labour.



Consider diverse language needs and provide adequate assessment and support for reading, writing, and conversational English. Newcomer men often cannot afford time to attend formal language classes, so opportunities to learn English on the job are a great way to offer support. Partner with a settlement organization to develop an on-site language program.

Promising Steps

Photo by Rami

At the time of this research, the government of BC introduced the International Credentials Recognition Act, helping decrease barriers across 29 professions by making it easier to get credential recognition, regardless of where people are trained. The act also aims to remove language testing. It is hoped that this legislation will help other refugee men to find work in their chosen fields. For more information please see: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2023PREM0063-001750>

Acknowledgements

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Related Links

To learn more about some of the men in this project, watch this video: ['Exploring refugee men's mental health and employment and integration in Canada'](#)

For information about the photo voice project and the researchers, read this article: ['How can photography uncover the mental health challenges faced by refugee men?'](#)

[AMSSA. \(2019\). Newcomer Men: Unique Challenges and Considerations. Migration Matters, 52](#)

[Hassan, G., Ventevogel, P., Jefee-Bahloul, H., Barkil-Oteo, A., & Kirmayer, L. J. \(2016\). Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of Syrians affected by armed conflict. Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences, 25\(2\), 129–141.](#)