
Who will resettle single Syrian men?

Lewis Turner

Resettlement programmes for Syrian refugees severely restrict access to resettlement for single men, despite the conditions of vulnerability, insecurity and danger in which they live.

Resettlement opportunities for Syrian refugees are allocated to those who are deemed to be particularly vulnerable, and thousands of Syrian men, women and children have now been resettled. However, single Syrian men ('unattached' or 'unaccompanied' adult males) living in Middle Eastern host states face particular challenges in accessing resettlement.

Host states that offer resettlement places for Syrians regularly exclude or try to minimise the numbers of single men. In November 2015, it was widely reported that the Canadian government would not be accepting any unaccompanied men, unless they identified themselves as non-heterosexual. Canadian officials denied there was a blanket ban on single men but acknowledged that families, women,

children and sexual minorities would be prioritised. The British government consistently cites women and children as examples of the 'most vulnerable'.

These policies should be understood in the context of domestic politics in resettlement states. Firstly, excluding or minimising the number of single men reflects the widely held view that 'authentic' refugees are women and children, who are implicitly vulnerable and in need of external assistance. Secondly, with these policies resettlement states are responding to, rather than challenging, Islamophobic portrayals of Muslim Arab men as threatening, and as potential terrorists, rather than as victims and survivors of the conflict in Syria.

The timetables imposed by some resettlement countries also create difficulties

for single men seeking resettlement. For example, the new Canadian government promised to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February 2016. Canadian visa officers were allowed to presume that those fleeing the conflict met the definition of a refugee, unless there was evidence to the contrary, and their interview process therefore focused on “security risks, criminality and health”.¹ Knowing that single men are liable to receive much more extensive security screening from resettlement states made resettlement officers in host countries less likely to submit single men for consideration. Furthermore, knowing that they are under pressure to reach targets (which are often politically imposed) discourages resettlement officers from working on case files of individuals, in favour of large families, and large Syrian families have at times been prioritised for resettlement for this reason. For resettlement officers, it can become pointless to work on the cases of single men, as this is likely to waste the resettlement officers’ time and needlessly raise refugees’ expectations.

‘Vulnerability’

Working within whatever restrictions a resettlement state lays down (publicly or

privately), opportunities for resettlement are distributed according to how ‘vulnerable’ refugees are deemed to be. As it pertains to resettlement, the categories of vulnerability include women at risk, survivors of violence and torture, children and adolescents at risk, those with medical needs or legal and physical protection needs, and those lacking foreseeable durable solutions.

While determinations of vulnerability are typically presented as objective and neutral, they are in fact deeply subjective and political. Single Syrian men’s chances for resettlement are determined, in part, by the prevailing perceptions of vulnerability in the humanitarian sector. Throughout my research into how the humanitarian sector approaches its work with Syrian men, I encountered a widespread and deeply ingrained assumption, subject to little critical scrutiny, that refugee women and children were the ones who were (most) vulnerable.

This assumption ignores the conditions of vulnerability and insecurity that Syrian men face.² Single Syrian men in particular are often rendered vulnerable by their circumstances. For example, in Lebanon many single Syrian men live in fear for their safety, predominantly due to threats



UNHCR/E Dorfman

A Syrian refugee, now living with his family in Lebanon, holds photos of his sons. He covers their faces to avoid recognition. Like other young Syrian men who have fled Syria, they fear they will be punished by the Syrian government or made to join the army should they be found.

they face from Lebanese authorities. Single Syrian men 'of military age' have been barred from entering Jordan since 2013, meaning that they were often forced to enter irregularly and may remain unregistered. This leaves them both vulnerable to exploitation and less able to access services.

NGO workers often assume that adult males could (or should) be working and therefore should be more self-sufficient than other refugees. Yet informal work entails the risk of arrest, forced encampment, or *refoulement* to Syria. Single Syrian men's vulnerability is reflected in data gathered by humanitarian actors, but this rarely translates into targeted humanitarian support or protection.

Two ways in which it can sometimes be possible for single Syrian men to be recognised as vulnerable and in need of resettlement is if they are either victims of torture or identify as non-heterosexual. Refugees whose cases for resettlement fall under the category of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) are recognised as a priority because of the persecution they might face. The number of valid cases for LGBT resettlement, however, far exceeds the number of places available, and LGBT refugees often encounter prejudice in their interactions with the humanitarian sector.

On the ground, resettlement officers understand that some countries of resettlement are more likely to be flexible than others; the United Kingdom, for example, has been fairly strict in its adherence to its strongly stated preference not to take single men for resettlement, while Canada did accept single men for resettlement on the grounds of an LGBT claim, severe disabilities or because they were victims of torture. Canadian private sponsors were also able to identify individuals for resettlement and were able to consider single men.

This means that there have been some limited chances for people to be resettled as individuals, rather than as part of families. According to figures released by the Canadian government, 9% of Syrian resettlement cases had a family size of '1'. While this percentage may appear quite

high, one must take into account that 22% of cases included between seven and 10 individuals, and 55% included between four and six individuals.³ This means that one would expect 100 cases to include around 500 individuals, of whom only nine would be resettled as individuals. Since the Canadian government does not release figures that provide a breakdown by gender and family size, it is not clear what proportion of these resettled individuals were male or female, although, given prevailing cultural norms, one might expect them to be predominantly male.

The notions of vulnerability employed in resettlement programmes and the short timeframes involved may be politically expedient but they come at the cost of ignoring a particular set of insecurities and threats that single male refugees face.

Additionally, while maintaining its focus on the conditions of vulnerability and insecurity that refugee women, girls and boys experience, the humanitarian sector needs to become more closely attuned to the conditions of vulnerability and insecurity that affect single refugee men (and adult male refugees more generally).⁴ This recognition would allow access to resettlement for a particular demographic group of refugees who are not typically thought of as vulnerable but who are often in danger, and would help humanitarian actors to engage more effectively with a group that is not ordinarily considered to be among its primary beneficiaries.

Lewis Turner lewis_turner@soas.ac.uk

PhD Candidate, Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS, University of London
www.soas.ac.uk

1. Information provided by the Canadian Embassy in Amman, via email, 19 July 2016.

2. Turner L (2016) 'Are Syrian Men Vulnerable Too? Gendering the Syria Refugee Response', Middle East Institute
<http://bit.ly/Turner-291116>

3. Government of Canada (2016) '#WelcomeRefugees: The Journey to Canada' <http://bit.ly/Canada-welcomerefugees>

4. See for example Davis R, Taylor A and Murphy E (2014) 'Gender, conscription and protection, and the war in Syria', *Forced Migration Review* issue 47
www.fmreview.org/syria/davis-taylor-murphy