Exploring food security among recently resettled Syrian refugees: results from a qualitative study in two Canadian cities

Hassan Vatanparast, Mustafa Koc, Marwa Farag, Joseph Garcea, Rachel Engler-Stringer, Tamer Qarmout, Carol Henry, Louise Racine, Judy White, Romaina Iqbal, Mahasti Khakpour, Sindhuja Dasarathi and Sonia D'Angelo

(Information about the authors can be found at the end of this article.)

Abstract

Purpose – *This study aims to provide a qualitative in-depth account of the status and experience of food insecurity for Syrian refugee households in Toronto and Saskatoon, Canada. The study considers the range of geographic, socio-economic, cultural and gendered components shaping and determining the barriers and management of food insecurity.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study included 54 semi-structured interviews with refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon who resettled in Canada after November 2015. In addition, 15 semi-structured in-person or telephone interviews were conducted with settlement and support agencies to measure their capacity to respond to issues of food insecurity for Syrian refugees.*

Findings – *Syrian refugees reported experiencing food insecurity as part of the broader resettlement journey, including in the transitional phase of refuge and in each settlement context in Canada. Income status in Canada was reported as a key barrier to food security. Low-income barriers to food security were experienced and shaped by factors including food affordability, physical access and availability and the extent of familial or other support networks including sponsorship relationships. Participants also reported how managing food insecurity contributed to the intensification of gender expectations.*

Originality/value – *The analysis reveals food insecurity as both an income and non-income based concern for refugees during the process of resettlement. The study also highlights the importance of considering variations between primary barriers to food security identified by Syrian families and key informants as critical to the development of strategies designed to mitigate the impacts of resettlement on food security.*

Keywords *Canada, Refugee, Resettlement, Food security, Socio-economic status, Culture, Gender, Qualitative*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

For many Syrians fleeing their home country and seeking protection from violence and states of prolonged conflict, Canada's pledge to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees was a welcome and significant international response. The Canadian Government's commitment to the resettlement of Syrian refugees since late 2015 has brought about a total of 41,081 Syrian refugees to Canada, with 25,000 successfully resettled between November 2015 and February 2016 (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2017). The arrival of Syrian refugees was prefaced by time spent displaced either in camps and/or other host countries. While resettlement may appear as the endpoint to the cycle of refugee displacement and instability, Syrian refugees continue to face barriers related to resettlement and integration. Furthermore, the arrival of such a large initial cohort of Syrian

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refugees has placed considerable demands on the part of settlement agencies, which often respond without adequate resources.

Information on the challenges and strategies of resettlement faced by Syrian refugees, while critical for evidence-based purposes, remains at present unavailable (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2018). The short timeline during which the initial cohort of Syrian refugees arrived in Canada offers an appropriate context for examining the vulnerabilities, challenges and barriers faced by Syrians and the responses implemented by settlement agencies. Canadian data identifies that at the household level, recent immigrants (less than 5 years) have higher levels of food insecurity (15.2%) than those composing of Canadian-born individuals (11.8%) (Tarasuk *et al.*, 2016). Although refugees are considered vulnerable to food insecurity (Hadley *et al.*, 2010; Hadley *et al.*, 2007; Vahabi *et al.*, 2011) the extent of risk resulting from one's status as a refugee remains under-examined (Tarasuk, 2017). The level of food insecurity experienced by Syrian refugees specifically is unknown.

The present study provides an in-depth account of the food security status, barriers and management, for Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon who resettled in Canada after November 2015, inclusive. Moreover, the study evaluated the geographic, socio-economic, cultural and gender dimensions of food security. To fully capture how the resettlement process impacts food security, we also evaluated the capacity of settlement agencies and support services to respond to issues of food insecurity for newly resettled Syrian families.

There are contentions around the conceptualization of food security by scholars, service providers and policy-makers, which consequently, have implications for how food security is measured and ultimately addressed (Cook, 2002; FAO *et al.*, 2003; Hoddinott, 1999; Moffat *et al.*, 2017; Smith *et al.*, 1992; Tarasuk, 2017). Despite such divergences, a widely recognized and commonly used definition is provided by The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations from the 1996 World Food Summit. The definition was modified in 2001 to include the social nature of food security. The definition outlines that food security "exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2003). Food insecurity, while understood in relation to food security, is a term, which also requires clarification. Food insecurity occurs when either the physical, social or economic aspects of food security access are absent or jeopardized (FAO, 2003; Gharras *et al.*, 2015).

Our research was specifically concerned with the household food security status of Syrian refugee families. While taking into account the above definitions, we determined how such components of food security manifest at the level of the household. The attributes of a food secure household included access to foods that are sufficient in quantity and quality, culturally acceptable, safe, nutritious and that such features are viable for a healthy life to all household members (Mutiah and Istiqomah, 2017). This study considers the range of geographic, socio-economic, cultural and gendered components shaping and determining the barriers and management to food insecurity for resettled Syrian families in Toronto and Saskatoon.

Methods

Study design

A descriptive qualitative study was undertaken to identify the food security status of Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon before and after their arrival, together with the capacity of support systems to address their food needs. In addition, the study engaged in an in-depth account of how culture, socio-economic status and gender impact the level and management of food security for Syrian refugee families. The study

design is cross-sectional and is meant to capture the experiences of Syrian refugee families who have resettled in Canada.

Participants and setting

The research population included Syrian refugee families who have resettled in two Canadian urban contexts, Toronto and Saskatoon, since November 2015 (Table 1 outlines the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample). Moreover, key informants, including participants from a range of settlement and community-based organizations (settlement officers/coordinators, policy developers, senior managers, program managers and directors), health-care professionals (dieticians and nurse practitioner) and government service employees (policy analyst and provincial program manager) responsible for the implementation of refugee programming were selected as part of the sample. A total of 7 interviews were conducted in Toronto (5 settlement and community-based organizations; dietician; policy analyst), while 8 were completed in Saskatoon (4 settlement and community-based organizations; 2 dieticians; nurse practitioner; provincial program manager). The diversity in the populace, cultural makeup, social structures and service

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Sociodemographic variable	*Saskatoon* (n = *26)*	*Toronto* (n = *28)*	*Total (54)*
Gender	Female: 4 (15%) Male: 22 (85%)	Female: 12 (43%) Male: 16 (57%)	Female: 16 (30%) Male: 38 (70%)
Age	40 (SD = 8.03)	38.5 (SD = 8.6)	39 (SD = 8.3)
Number of children	3 (max: 6)	3 (max: 8)	3
Income (categories)	1. <10,000 (*n* = 4, 15.4%) 2. 10,000–20,000(*n* = 1, 3.8%) 3. 20,000–30,000 (*n* = 5, 19.2%) 4. 30,000–40,000 (*n* = 10, 38.5%) 5. 40,000–50,000 (*n* = 5, 19.2%) 6. >50,000 (*n* = 1, 3.8%) 7. Not answered: 0	1. <10,000 (*n* = 3, 10.7%) 2. 10,000–20,000(*n* = 4, 14.3%) 3. 20,000–30,000 (*n* = 3, 10.7%) 4. 30,000–40,000 (*n* = 4, 14.3%) 5. 40,000–50,000 (*n* = 5, 17.9%) 6. >50,000 (*n* = 2, 7.1%) 7. Not answered: (*n* = 7, 25%)	1. <10,000 (*n* = 7, 13%) 2. 10,000–20,000(*n* = 5, 9.3%) 3. 20,000–30,000 (*n* = 8, 14.8%) 4. 30,000–40,000 (*n* = 14, 25.9%) 5. 40,000–50,000 (*n* = 10, 18.5%) 6. >50,000 (*n* = 3, 5.6%) 7. Not answered: (*n* = 7, 13%)
Income source	1. Provincial or municipal assistance and welfare (*n* = 7, 26.9%) 2. Child tax benefit (*n* = 9, 34.6%) 3. Monetary assistance from other organizations (*n* = 1, 3.8%) 4. Wage and salary (*n* = 6, 23.1%) 5. Dividend and interest (*n* = 1, 3.8%) 6. Unidentified (*n* = 2, 7.7%)	1. Provincial or municipal assistance and welfare (*n* = 12, 42.9%) 2. Child tax benefit (*n* = 8, 28.6%) 3. Monetary assistance from other organizations (*n* = 3, 10.7%) 4. Wage and salary (*n* = 3, 10.7%) 5. Dividend and interest (*n* = 0, 0%) 6. Unidentified (*n* = 2, 7.1%)	1. Provincial or municipal assistance and welfare (*n* = 19, 35.2%) 2. Child tax benefit (*n* = 17, 31.5%) 3. Monetary assistance from other organizations (*n* = 4, 7.4%) 4. Wage and salary (*n* = 9, 16.7%) 5. Dividend and interest (*n* = 1, 1.9%) 6. Unidentified (*n* = 4, 7.4%)
Education (Categories)	1. Low literacy to primary school (*n* = 11, 42%) 2. Middle school – high school (*n* = 13, 50%) 3. High school diploma (*n* = 2, 8%) 4. University/trade degree (*n* = 0, 0%)	1. Low literacy to primary school (*n* = 8, 28.6%) 2. Middle school – high school (*n* = 8, 28.6%) 3. High school diploma (*n* = 4, 14.2%) 4. University/trade degree (*n*= 8, 28.6%)	1. Low literacy to primary school (*n* = 19, 35%) 2. Middle school – high school (*n* = 21, 39%) 3. High school diploma (*n* = 6, 11%) 4. University/trade degree (*n* = 8, 15%)
Duration of stay	2015 (*n* = 5, 19%) 2016 (*n* = 21, 81%)	All arrived in 2016	2015 (*n* = 5, 9%) 2016 (*n* = 49, 91%)
Refugee categories	All government assisted	GAR (*n* = 22, 79%) PSR (*n* = 5, 18%) BVOR (*n* = 1, 3%)	GAR (*n* = 8, 89%) PSR (*n* = 5, 9%) BVOR (*n* = 1, 2%)

supports between the two urban settings provided suitable contexts in which to investigate the gendered, cultural and socio-economic dimensions of food security. A sample of 69 participants was included using a non-probability snowball sampling procedure. Data saturation ultimately directed the sampling size. To facilitate the sampling process, study coordinators in both cities contacted and leveraged connections with local refugee settlement agencies and community members.

Data collection

Data was collected between December 2016 and February 2017. The study included 54 semi-structured interviews with resettled Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon. The interviews with Syrian refugee families focused on the challenges, barriers, cultural and gendered nature of food security and the adequacy of support services based on their experiences. In addition, 15 semi-structured in-person or telephone interviews were conducted with key informants. Key informant interviews addressed the capacity of service providers and agencies to support and respond to the food security issues facing Syrian refugees.

A toolkit was developed to train interviewers on the purpose of the project, ethical protocols and to review the interview guide. Interviewers with both English and Arabic language proficiency were hired and conducted the interviews in the language most suitable for and selected by, the refugee participants. Notably, all interviews with Syrian refugees were completed in Arabic. Key informants were interviewed in English only. Interviews were conducted at resettlement service agency locations and community events or for some key informants over the phone and lasted approximately 45 min.

Data analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded, those conducted in Arabic were translated into English and all interviews were transcribed. The data were analyzed using NVivo, and a thematic analytic method was applied. The thematic analysis allowed us to be creative and thorough in our analysis. By looking at patterns repeatedly, we were able to identify the intersectional nature of conceptual themes. The analysis process began with open coding procedures whereby emerging data categories, key points, themes and patterns were recorded during iterative reviews of the data. Data categories were then synthesized compared and assessed to capture different dimensions of meaning. Finally, selective coding was conducted to integrate the categories into broader conceptual themes. While this paper presents qualitative findings, it is significant to note that this work is part of a larger mixed-methods study. Triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative results will ensure both an in-depth account of the aspects and impacts of food security and a comprehensive overview of the food security status of Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon.

Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from the research ethics boards at [removed for review]. Participants were informed of the purpose, risks, benefits and procedures of the study. Written informed consent was obtained for both in-person and telephone interviews. Consent forms were reviewed with participants and the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview was emphasized by the research assistants.

Results

There were five overarching themes which emerged from the data related to the food security status of Syrian refugee families:

1. The geographic perceptions of food security;
2. The impact of socio-economic status;
3. The intersecting of gender roles, food security challenges and responses;
4. Cultural foodways and barriers; and
5. The role of services agencies and community networks.

Geographic perceptions of food security

Participants shared their experiences of their migration trajectory to Canada and the impacts of migration pathways and resettlement location on their food accessibility, availability, choices and overall the perception of their food security status. Below we consider the food security narratives of Syrian families in the:

- Pre-departure state in Syria;
- Transitory phase; and
- Post-arrival status in Canada.

Pre-departure status

Generally, concerns about the state of food security in Syria were limited to experiences of food cost unpredictability, and at times, food security issues and concerns were absent in the narratives of Syrian families. Before the war in Syria, participants described the food system as robust, accessible (both economically and physically) and foods as nutritious, local (participants used the word Baladi), tasty and high in quality. Participants did, however, identify the beginning of the war as a significant temporal moment when issues mainly around high food costs and unpredictability surfaced, and to a lesser extent, transient periods of scarcity in some essential foods such as bread, sugar and tea.

Syrian families described the importance of drawing on social and familial networks as key strategies to offset the sharp increase in food costs and fluctuating prices.

Transitory status

After leaving Syria, families sought temporary refuge either in camps or cities in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and in some instances Egypt and other parts of Africa. Syrian refugees described this transitory state as the most challenging both regarding maintaining a sense of safety and security as it not only relates to food access and availability but also in regard to living conditions and social acceptance from nationals. To expand on the latter momentarily, Syrian refugees described various forms of social exclusion and exploitation which characterized their experiences in host countries. For example, some experienced threats of arrest or even deportation for attempting to seek employment; others expressed how locals would exploit them economically by increasing the cost of rent and the number of hours they could work. They emphasized how this state of precarity and exploitation impacted their overall economic capacity to access to food.

Access to a sufficient amount of food and high-quality food appeared to be a problem. Food rationing practices by humanitarian organizations and the UNHCR failed, according to our participants, to provide a sufficient amount of and/or nutritious food. Families also described how a lack of food autonomy or in other words the capacity to make food choices, limited their food consumption to poor quality (described as rotten, expired and even canned) foods, especially in camps. One participant captured how the lack of food autonomy impacted his overall health: "regarding food, they used to give us a lot of canned food in the refugee camp. Plus there were no stores at all in the camp, so we

started to get sick" [Interviewee 2]. Participants often connected the consumption of such low-quality foods with health outcomes such as food poisoning, allergies and sensitivities.

Post-arrival status

Syrian refugee families in Toronto and Saskatoon emphasized different initial challenges upon arrival to Canada. Those who resettled in Toronto described the primary challenges to their food security status as related to language barriers and weather conditions (i.e. how winter conditions such as snowstorms may complicate one's ability to access public transit). In regard to language barriers, participants voiced how their inability to speak or read English poses challenges getting to grocery stores, for example in understanding bus schedules, finding food while in a grocery store and in making culturally appropriate and economical decisions while shopping. Conversely, those who resettled in Saskatoon highlighted the reliance on transportation to access food, and relatedly, the high costs of car expenses as significant challenges. A larger number of Syrian refugees in Saskatoon articulated inconvenient locations and distance to grocery stores as a barrier, compared to those in Toronto. Those in Saskatoon described how these barriers ultimately forced their dependence on car transportation, and, in turn, impacted their overall finances and food budget.

Other obstacles expressed in both urban contexts include access to halal food, access to Arabic/Syrian foods and the high costs of accessing such foods. One participant neatly captures how access options vary greatly between Syria and Canada:

> In Syria, we did not face any difficulty in transportation. We did not need to go to the city. Where we lived everything was available. For example, grocery stores and for halal food, we did not need to go to a special place or visit many places to get it [Interviewee 12].

Notably, the lack of abundance related to culturally appropriate food was more visible in Saskatoon than Toronto. Participants also described how the location of food stores, halal or Arabic, but in some cases, grocery stores generally, has also increased the amount of time Syrian refugee families dedicate to commuting, either by car or transit, to and from stores.

Socio-economic status and barriers

The study illustrated the contexts and ways in which Syrian households managed the socio-economic barriers of food security. The food security status of Syrian families is mediated by income, cultural determinates, neighborhood location, household preferences and the retention and exchange of food knowledge.

Participants described how food decisions are primarily impacted by income. The prices of food, both halal and non-halal, were primary factors shaping what kind, quantity, quality and the apparent nutritional value of food that was purchased. For example, families spoke about reducing the amount of meat and vegetables from their diets due to costs. Cheap and alternate food options, meant to compensate for low income, were described by one participant:

> We limit on the purchase to cheap food, so we can still have money until the end of the month. If we do not do that we will stay without money for several days until the government gives us money. We buy, for example, rice, lentils because they are cheap and they are satisfying meals [Interviewee 42].

Thus, families supplemented this loss in quantity with cheap but still nutritious and culturally appropriate foods, such as rice and lentils. Others also turned to frozen, canned or prepared foods instead of fresh foods as a strategy to deal with issues of economic access. Participants also spoke of the strategies they use to retain meat in their diets. For example, as one Syrian man described:

> If we want to eat the same food quality and quantity that we had in Syria, we cannot because we do not have enough money to buy everything. We are trying to reduce and choose the food that works with our budget. For example, instead of cooking with a whole chicken, now we cook with only wings for the kids to eat and my wife and me eat [what remains] [Interviewee 50].

Syrian families also spoke about serving meats as side dishes, complemented by more affordable main dishes, as a strategy to manage food access. While halal foods were described as sometimes economically inaccessible, they still emphasized the importance of purchasing halal products.

Families also spoke about the challenges in making decisions about how to spend money on food. They perceived food budgets as flexible, thus at times they reduced their food costs to spend money on more fixed expenses such as television, cellphones and child-related expenses, as described:

> [. . .] they didn't take into account that the children need a TV to watch, we were used to the fact that it cost us nothing to get a TV, but here you have to pay money. For example, they didn't take into account a phone, so these things, how we are going to get them. So we must cut from something to spend on another thing. So we are cutting out from the money for food to pay for the bills [Interviewee 36]

In Saskatoon particularly, neighborhood location shaped both availability and the overall costs of accessing food. Household or familial food preferences, requests made by children or husbands and nutritional awareness, like avoiding canned food for the health of children, also shaped food decisions.

The data also revealed the importance of social networks as a strategy to manage food security. Families reiterated the importance of Syrian and other Arab peers in helping them navigate food systems and in making food choices, such as purchasing quality and tasty foods. These social networks were also pivotal in understanding and gaining knowledge about halal and non-halal food options. Social media, such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups, were also mentioned as a means to obtain immediate knowledge about how to access and determine culturally appropriate and affordable foods.

Gender roles, food security challenges and responses

Food security management was articulated by participants through culturally mediated understandings, tensions and intensifications of traditional gender roles. Participants expressed culturally-based contradictions in the way gender roles are carried out in the resettlement process in Canada. Syrian men spoke about a loss in status as breadwinners due to their unemployment and lack of English language skills. They echoed this sentiment by reiterating the pressures they often felt from not only their wives but also themselves, to seek employment. Income structures like the child benefit tax are paid to Syrian mothers only. This practice restructures gendered perceptions and positions, women, as income providers. One key informant offered their anecdotal experience describing tensions in cultural understandings of gender roles post-migration:

> I found that trauma is more evident in the men because they come from a culture where the man is the breadwinner and the decision-maker and the new situation emasculates them. The women come here they already didn't know anything so they are more eager to learn and more receptive to learning and so the man has to act as capable and wants to be seen in her eyes as relevant. The child tax benefit plays a major role in conflict because it comes in the name of the woman. So for the first time this woman, who never had anything and it comes in her name. So the man feels emasculated [Key informant 6].

As some men are without work, they have also taken on tasks associated with social reproduction, like providing care for their children. One Syrian man also described how a lack of familial support in Canada, particularly the lack of female support systems, forced

him to take on roles unaccustomed to him in Syria, he states: "of course in Syria, we have my sisters and my mother help, but here I don't have anyone. I help my wife with everything" [Interviewee 43].

One Syrian woman captured how changes in gender roles, specifically the intensification of domestic work for refugee women in Canada, impact household food management:

> [. . .] my in-laws were responsible for the home stuff. They used to get me all that I need and I cooked only. Here I am responsible for almost everything even the clothes, my eldest daughter's clothes shopping as well. I am responsible for everything at home [Interviewee 10].

Chiefly, the shift and intensification of the roles of women have lessened the number of time women are able to dedicate to managing food choices, preferences and nutrition. As a response to the intensification of domestic work for women and the diminution of time dedicated to food management, especially purchasing and preparing foods, some families have turned to prepared, canned or frozen foods. Syrian women articulated a sense of dissatisfaction with these shifts in time usage and their reliance on prepared or canned foods. As one woman reflected on her turn to prepared and canned foods, she also highlighted a sense of discontent:

> Now my lifestyle is that I leave home in the morning and come back in the late afternoon because I also volunteer to support other Syrian refugees to finish paperwork because they can't speak English. So I translate for them, so I don't have time. I go back home, nothing is prepared so whatever is easier and available I just use it. This is wrong but I have no other option. Maybe later on when I have more time. Even though I love cooking, but most of the time, I don't have time [Interviewee 3].

Not only Syrian women but also some men underscored how the management of food security challenges remained a gendered task. Generally, women described how a lack of familial support, increased domestic and care work (i.e. taking on more tasks, like bringing children to school, caring for children, cleaning and cooking), educational purists (including English classes, paid work, volunteering) and running errands have together altered the ways in which they can prepare, shop and provide food for their families.

Cultural barriers and dimensions

The resettlement process has compelled Syrian refugees to adapt to new food systems and ways. One participant succinctly captures the variances between Syrian and Canadian food systems:

> There is a difference, the flavor of food, the price of food, the method of buying food. For example, buying food, at 12:00 am, I used to go to my neighborhood store and buy from there, but hereafter 8:00 pm, for example, the supermarket is closed. It's a big difference. Everything is different [Interviewee 20].

Food stores in Syria while described as primarily localized and as more convenient in location, they are also described as higher in quality and more economically feasible due to bulk pricing. While the difference here is illustrated mainly as differences between the organization of food systems in Canada and Syria, the difference is also articulated in a more multidimensional way by participants.

The differences in food systems were also described in the form of language barriers. Participants offered examples of the difficulties they experience in reading product and store labels, and particularly how such language barriers limit their food options either because they cannot understand what they are buying or they are concerned about not adhering to halal standards. Two participants describe food access challenges as they intersect with language limitations:

> When I buy canned food I have to read the ingredients and this is a challenge. I don't buy anything that I don't know. If I don't know the ingredients or if it has gelatin or preservatives, I don't buy it. I have to know it and this is a big challenge [Interviewee 19].

> [. . .when we want to buy chocolate for the kids, I wouldn't know whether it is halal or not. I have been here for a year now and I still don't know because we didn't learn the language very well [Interviewee 34].

Language barriers were often contextualized against narratives of grocery shopping in Syria where barriers such as identifying and accessing culturally appropriate halal foods were non-existent.

The cost of accessing, together with the lack of availability, of halal food options was also a concern for Syrian families and many describe changing their cultural-based food habits and preparations, i.e. eating less meat or consuming canned food, to adapt to Canadian food systems. Syrian families also underscored the difference in taste and quality of food in Canada and Syria, often describing fruits, vegetables and meats in Syria as tastier or as local, while Canadian products were described as bland.

Syrian refugee families also compared the socio-cultural dimensions of food consumption in Canada and Syria. One Syrian woman described the stark differences between the social dimensions of food in Canada and Syria:

> Like the most important thing is social life. I noticed that it is not available here. Like you are now in Syria, you are in a neighborhood, like: "good morning, my neighbor! Come for coffee. Come for tea." You find yourself happy every day. Here, nothing. No social life. No interaction between people here. It is difficult how they're living here [Interviewee 22].

Others reiterated these differences and described how the social aspects of foodways like food exchanges, sharing and reliance between family and neighbors and the everyday casual gatherings with neighbors for coffee/tea, have diminished significantly, as their arrival to Canada.

Service agencies and community networks

Syrian families in Saskatoon were more inclined to turn to food banks to address their food security issues than families in Toronto. At the same time, both refugees and service providers were critical of the lack of halal food options provided by food banks. Some service providers commented on food waste resulting from the reliance on food banks and other food charities. Food waste, in this context, was multifaceted and included situations in which: food offerings were deemed culturally inappropriate; refugees did not want or didn't know how to use the food offered to them; and finally, the excessive use of food banks by refugees, resulting in high food disposal rates. Together these situations were said to contribute to higher levels of food insecurity for refugees either because they were not given access to suitable food preferences or for more critical reasons such that these services ultimately encouraging dependency as a model to achieve food security.

Service providers also offered narratives about food security which were tied into a network of issues shaping refugee resettlement, namely, poverty, unemployment, language barriers, insecure housing and daycare unaffordability. Most identified these aspects as precursors for food security. Service providers also accounted for the efficacy of some pre-existing strategies, and the need for expanding these strategies, to help address the food security status of refugees. For example, seminars on food and nutrition, safety and access, garden projects and community-based cooking and nutrition programs, were deemed relevant and practical avenues to pursue by service providers

There was no overarching consensus from refugee participants about the efficacy of service agencies in addressing their food security issues or barriers. When questioned about the various ways service agencies can assist to address food concerns, some agreed that they were generally helpful. Others felt they did not receive any help from agencies, either because they did not need any assistance, they were unfamiliar with agencies available to them or because such agencies were unhelpful or unwilling to listen to their actual concerns.

Both service providers and refugees themselves commented on the positive outcomes associated with strong social connections and extended networks. Syrian families who entered Canada through the private sponsorship stream reiterated how sponsors were crucial in helping them navigate food availability and to secure access to food by providing necessary logistical support. Many emphasize how their sponsors assisted, and continue to assist them, by accessing halal and other culturally relevant foods. Service agencies, on the other hand, were critical of the lack of accountability the private sponsorship program upholds. Unlike government-assisted refugees, some view the potential breakdown of the sponsorship relationship as possibly threatening to refugees, in terms of their housing circumstances, income and also their food security.

The refugee participants emphasize the importance of social networks to their food security status, including friends, acquaintances on social media platforms and their sponsors. One Syrian woman described the importance of friends and social networks as factors shaping food choices:

> I ask [my friends], I am preparing this meal, where can I find good quality?[...] Where is the quality that I can trust? Did you try it? We have a group, us Syrians in Canada on "whats" [referring to Whatsapp] and "face" [referring to Facebook] so anybody who has a question, messages in the group and others answer, like almost 50 women in Canada [Interviewee 28].

Likewise, participants from services agencies echoed the importance of these connections and described how a lack of pre-existing social networks affects government-assisted refugees who may resettle in Canada without the opportunity to rely on such networks.

Discussion

The geopolitical context in which Syrian refugees fled is nothing short of formidable, and the migratory journey which accompanies the state of refugees brings about its own set of physical, social, cultural and ecological challenges. While food insecurity was not identified as one of the primary causes forcing Syrians to leave their home country, results indicated that food insecurity manifests most clearly in the transitional and post-migration contexts for Syrian refugees. It also remains unclear to what extent food insecurity in these contexts is related to the traumas of displacement, and to a larger sense of insecurity, however food security is evidently a concern existing in advance of and continuing over the course of resettlement and in the present study, for some even extending into their second year of residency in Canada.

One of the findings of the study has been the discovery that refugees are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity issues as a result of their low-income status in Canada. Low-income barriers to food security are experienced and shaped by a multitude of intersecting factors including the kind of sponsorship relationship, the extent of familial or other support networks, range of transportation options, proximity to grocery stores, food affordability and availability. Households identified as particularly vulnerable to food insecurity include groups such as, but not limited to, families with children, lone-parent families, social assistance dependent families, racialized groups, Indigenous peoples, new immigrants and refugees (Dharod *et al.*, 2013; Dietitians of Canada, 2016; FAO, 2013; FAO, 2003; Hadley *et al.*, 2010).

Specifically, when compared with other immigrant groups, refugees remain one of the segments of people most vulnerable to food insecurity, predominantly as a result of economic restraints (Hadley *et al.*, 2010, 2007; Vahabi *et al.*, 2011; Khakpour *et al.*, 2019). Generally, low-income levels increase the risk of food insecurity (Loopstra *et al.*, 2015; Tarasuk *et al.*, 2016; Tarasuk, 2017). Many of the participants identified social assistance as their primary income source. As the literature reveals, relying on social assistance as a source of income enhances the risks of food insecurity for households (Tarasuk *et al.*, 2016). Thus, when we consider the post-migration context for Syrian refugee families, their displacement coupled with their low-income status has brought about elevated risks for food insecurity.

The study also demonstrated how food insecurity is more complicated than food access alone, and ultimately it is impacted by food affordability (Tarasuk, 2017; Premanandh, 2011; Khakpour *et al.*, 2019). Dimensions of food access include economic and to a lesser degree physical access to necessary and desired foods. Many of the participants expressed how culturally appropriate foods, including halal, were beyond their economic means, despite their availability. The economic dimensions of food security were expressed by Syrian families as they described limiting their consumption of meats, and even vegetables, due to high costs, a sense of discontent and frustration as a result of their inability to afford halal foods (Moffat *et al.*, 2017). Food affordability thus shaped the food choices of participants in ways that may not be nutritionally sufficient or culturally fulfilling. Delimiting food options due to a lack of affordability consequently appeared as one of the adverse material outcomes of food insecurity (Girard and Sercia, 2013).

The results of the study are also consistent with research which indicates low-income or financial constraints as a barrier to food access (Moffat *et al.*, 2017; Tarasuk, 2017; Khakpour *et al.*, 2019). While some participants in Saskatoon attempted to address issues of economic access, and lack of availability through the use of food banks, many described food banks as failing to provide culturally appropriate and high-quality foods (Moffat *et al.*, 2017) that may otherwise be economically inaccessible to them. Though food access may be mitigated by the use of food banks, and while food bank use alone is an imperfect measure of food security levels (Tarasuk, 2017), both refugees and key informants were highly critical of food banks as a strategy to address income-related issues of access (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2012). Instead, some service providers and refugees themselves emphasized how basic income-related strategies are better suited to addressing food affordability and access.

The study also recognizes the various cultural dimensions of food security for Syrian refugee families. Cultural foodways are imperative to consider when evaluating the food security status of refugee households as shifts in cultural food accessibility, availability, use and consumption impact the experience of food insecurity (Moffat *et al.*, 2017). Both service providers and refugees described how a lack of English language skills impacts the process of purchasing, using and ultimately consuming culturally based foods. For our participants, literacy around food labels, especially as it relates to the purchase of halal foods, appeared to be an issue while shopping for food (Koc and Welsh, 2001; Moffat *et al.*, 2017; Hadley *et al.*, 2010). However, literacy was less of a concern for privately sponsored refugees who were able to rely on their sponsors for any issues related to translation. Beyond the cultural barriers to food security rooted in literacy and translation issues, both refugees and service providers described a sense of resistance to Western or different ethnocultural foods. For service providers this hesitancy appeared to be culturally and religiously determined, indicating how non-Muslim Syrians were more likely to try other foods, including fast, canned and fresh foods. While dietary enculturation or resistance to adapting to Canadian food habits, may explain the experience of some recently resettled Syrian families, most of the participants expressed their inability to retain their cultural food habits because of food insecurity. Relatedly, increases in travel time (to access culturally

appropriate foods) and the time spent physically shopping (for reasons related to literacy) were also described as barriers affecting the cultural dimensions of food security (Moffat *et al.*, 2017).

While service providers recognize the challenges in accessing cultural foods, they did not, however, narrate the cultural basis of food insecurity in the same way as Syrians families. Similar to the study undertaken by Moffat *et al.* (2017), our results indicate that service providers tend to discuss cultural food insecurity as income-related, as a lack of availability, a deficiency in knowing how to use new foods, in difficulties shopping for food and as a lack of knowledge about Canadian food systems. The cultural basis of food insecurity appeared in the narratives offered by Syrian families predominantly as discussions about the changes in taste and quality of food. Syrian food was perceived as organic, local, healthier, higher in quality and tastier than Canadian foods. Notably, participants emphasized the difference in taste between fresh Canadian and Syrian food products (Girard and Sercia, 2013; Moffat *et al.*, 2017); Canadian products were referred to as bland and as having a taste that requires adjusting to. In line with other studies, Syrian families also identified challenges around accessing fresh and high-quality foods (Koc and Welsh, 2001), such as vegetables and meats, in quantities, which reasonably meet Syrian dietary standards. The use of canned foods to accommodate a lack of time or affordability, and having to grocery shop only once a week were some of the reasons Syrian families identified as impacting cultural food choices. The lack of autonomy to make cultural food choices impacts how Syrian families perceive the quality, taste and nutritional value of their food intake. The significance Syrian families assigned to accessing cultural foods, whether to satisfy taste, quality, familial preferences or nutritional needs, reiterates the importance of taking into account the cultural basis of food security and specifically in shaping dietary habits following resettlement (Koc and Welsh, 2001; Renzaho and Burns, 2006).

Similar to studies which examine the role of food work in identity maintenance (D'Sylva and Beagan, 2011; Koc and Welsh, 2001; Vallianatos and Raine, 2008), our results indicate that the work of addressing food security remains tied to familial and social connections in a way which seeks to preserve gendered relations and a sense of cultural belonging. Syrian women experienced an intensification of their gender roles and the amount of labor they were expected to engage in post-migration. Some men engaged in domestic duties to respond to the new or changing contexts shaping gender expectations or to offer support for the lack of extended familial networks of women, while others sought to maintain more traditional gender roles and divisions of labor. The social/familial facets which accompany the attainment, use and stability of food have diminished for Syrians families post-migration. Respondents reported an absence of social and familial networks which for them once ensured that they had enough time to cook familial and cultural preferred dishes, and by extension, guaranteed them access to quick, free food. On the one hand, Syrian families expressed how a lack of daily interaction with neighbors, friends or family has impacted their ability to address their food needs, preferences and barriers. Syrian women iterated how a lack of familial connections in Canada impacted how they prepared food and the kinds of food they offered their family. They also highlighted a sense of isolation which resulted from a lack of sociality which once accompanied food-sharing habits prominent in Syrian culture. On the other hand, strategies to address food security have made it necessary for Syrian families to seek community ties, whether through sponsorship reliance, social media or acquaintances. Community ties have been essential to navigating food systems in ways, which are attentive to the economic and cultural barriers families face. Thus, the struggles many Syrian families faced in preserving cultural food habits are addressed and safeguarded through varying degrees of social connections.

Limitations of research

This exploratory study was concerned with resettled Syrian families and key informants in Toronto and Saskatoon. The sampling technique relied on Syrian families referred to and accessed through community connections and resettlement service agencies. Thus, this strategy may have limited the range and type of data collected from Syrian families. Furthermore, the inclusion criteria limited the population sample to Syrian families resettled in Canada after December of 2015. The cross-sectional nature of the study meant that we were concerned with capturing in-depth accounts of the status and management of food security status for Syrian households and resettlement agencies in the early integration period. While our primary concern was with detailing this crucial and pressure-ridden period for both refugees and agencies, longitudinal research is required to elicit the long-term results of the intersections between the length of stay and food security for refugees and the long-term role of resettlement agencies in ensuring food security.

Conclusion

The multidimensional and nuanced account of the experiences of managing food insecurity for refugees is valuable in helping improve resettlement policies, programs and services. Notably, the dissonance between the primary barriers to food security identified by Syrian families and key informants is also critical to consider when developing strategies to mitigate the impacts of resettlement on food security. There is a clear need for increased incomes as a solution to food insecurity, and evidently, strategies limited to food based-knowledge and community access programs alone are not enough. Nonetheless, if culturally attentive, such programs can address language and cultural-based barriers associated with food access, such as food label literacy and navigation and knowledge of foodways.

Strategies to address the experience of food insecurity for Syrian refugees in Canada should also extend into strengthening and ensuring social ties and networks in Canada. Broadening both social and familial ties for refugees, for example, through fortifying community or faith-based food programs or support systems and family reunification, may help to address time-based limitations around meal preparation and the increasing sense of pressure refugees face in managing family meals and affording food in general. Future research may seek to address disparities in the way in which different classes of refugees manage food insecurity in relation to various communities of support. For example, this sample largely consists of government-assisted refugees, thus while in theory, they receive support from settlement service agencies, there may be a disjuncture in how they seek food assistance from settlement agencies compared to privately sponsored refugees, who may have greater access to social support systems.

While establishing social and familial networks of support may to some extent address the intensification of gender role expectations for Syrian women, this alone does not address the dynamic relationship between gender, food work, care and labor market decisions. For example, while women expressed concerns around a lack of time (as a result of paid work, care work or due to volunteering, what feminist scholars describe as the third shift), absence of support and managing food work, we cannot fully grasp how food security management impacts gendered sociality and identity. Plainly, future research can consider the ways in which food security affects the ability of Syrian women in establishing, maintaining and leveraging networks of support, which are not only necessary for food management but which may also be critical in shaping gendered, social and cultural identities and meanings. Furthermore, research investigating labor market decisions and outcomes for women will also offer greater insight into the role of employment in managing food security, and the extent to which income allocated to mitigate food insecurity itself

might be gendered. In this sense, changes and fluctuations in the use of time pre and post-migration (i.e. changes in food shopping habits, such as daily to weekly) and the role of family compositions (ex. the role of younger vs older children) may also make a difference in terms of how and the degree to which Syrian women address household food security issues. Broadly, research on food security, and the intensification of gendered expectations specifically, might also benefit from a more critical evaluation of the ways in which managing, preparing and making food choices may serve to further oppress women, renewing gender stereotypes and/or may function as a source of empowerment for women.

Food insecurity remains a concern for refugees during the process of resettlement.

Our analysis reveals how the experiences of food insecurity for Syrian refugees in Canada extended beyond income-based barriers of food access and availability. The intersections between migratory contexts, language barriers, cultural expectations, gender dynamics and social and familial connections, all influenced in what ways and whether Syrian families managed and alleviated barriers to food security. While the study is not fully representative of the heterogeneous refugee population in Canada, more comparative work is needed to assess how food security is differently experienced within and between diverse refugee groups at varying points in the migration and resettlement process.

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Author affiliations

Hassan Vatanparast is based at the School of Public Health, College of Pharmacy and Nutrition, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Mustafa Koc is based at the School of Pubic Administration and Development Economics, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar and the School of Public Health, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Marwa Farag is based at the School of Public Health, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Joseph Garcea is based at the Department of Political Studies, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Rachel Engler-Stringer is based at the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Tamer Qarmout is based at the School of Public Administration and Development Economics, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Doha, Qatar

Carol Henry is based at the College of Pharmacy and Nutrition, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Louise Racine is based at the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Judy White is based at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, Regina, Canada

Romaina Iqbal is based at the Departments of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan

Mahasti Khakpour is based at the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, College of Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada

Sindhuja Dasarathi is based at the Ministry of Health, Victoria, Canada, and

Sonia D'Angelo is based at the Department of Sociology, York University, Toronto, Canada

Corresponding author

Hassan Vatanparast can be contacted at: vatan.h@usask.ca

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