

Title: Waiting for a Wife: Transnational Marriages and the Social Dimensions of Refugee 'Integration'

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Research Question:

What is refugee integration? What impedes the social integration of refugees from Aceh, Indonesia, all of whom who were resettled to Vancouver, BC?

Importance:

Social integration is often ignored in favour of more measurable aspects of integration, yet it is inseparable from employment and other more economic activities. This paper shows how certain conditions of refugee resettlement, coupled with Canadian immigration policy on family reunification, have had the unintended effect of making these newcomers wait years to start a family, keeping them from engaging in the everyday work of 'becoming Canadian'.

Research Findings:

Our findings are mapped out more fully in working paper 10-12 where we show that holding several jobs and working full-time in order to save for a passport, travel, and a wedding in Aceh works at cross-purposes with taking official language classes and 'integrating' into Canadian society. Here we draw on findings that explain why this strategy of transnational marriage is important to the Acehnese, and how a skewed sex ratio among those resettled and the absence of a co-ethnic community of others from Aceh creates this demand.

Implications:

Two main points for policy emerge from this paper. First, a more explicit definition of 'integration' is called for to allow researchers and settlement agencies to measure the process, develop appropriate methods to study it and strategies to promote it. Second, social integration – something we define as belonging to and participating in Canadian society – is intimately tied up with activities one might classify as economic integration, so a refugee who recently arrives in Canada may hold three jobs (good economic integration by some measures) and yet s/he may be highly employed at the cost of not being able to attend official language classes to improve language ability and communication in Canada (Brunner et al., 2010).

A major impediment to 'integration' is the long waits that *precede* marriage, predicated largely on saving enough money to travel to Aceh, pay for the ceremony, and remit to family in Aceh both before and after the wedding. In short, the situation of the Acehnese who are 'waiting for wives' is an unintended consequence of Canada's constructive humanitarian decision to settle this group languishing in detention in Malaysia. The newness of the group in Canada and the skewed sex ratio of the group coupled with an expensive sponsorship protocol for spouses and long processing times have created timelines that extend for many years, often five or more. All of the single men we spoke to aspire to marry someone from Aceh and work several jobs to save money, but forfeiting ESL classes and sites of civic engagement with other Canadians in the meantime.

Expedited processing of spouses would allow the Acehnese to shift their gaze from Aceh to Greater Vancouver. Waiting for a wife from Aceh is a major distraction from integration in Canada.