Research Report on the Local Integration Experiences of Young Afghan Women in the Greater Toronto Area

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1. Introduction

This research, conducted between January 2024 and May 2026, examines the local integration (LI) challenges faced by young Afghan women newly arrived in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Despite institutional efforts to promote integration, persistent structural constraints continue to limit women's agency across the legal, cultural, social, and economic dimensions of settlement. Accordingly, the study analyzes how these women navigate integration within these interconnected dimensions, with particular attention to the structural challenges shaping their lived realities.

To this end, the research focuses on lived experiences and meaning-making processes, employing semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and thematic analysis to examine how five participants construct meanings around their realities, as well as to identify broader patterns across cases. While the interview guide was structured around thematic dimensions to ensure analytical coherence, the data collection process remained flexible and incorporated storytelling techniques by encouraging participants to elaborate on their responses through prompts such as "please explain" or "can you tell me more?". This approach enabled participants to move beyond short answers and reconstruct their experiences in narrative form, thereby capturing the subjective dimensions of integration in line with an interpretivist methodological framework.

The theoretical framework adopts a multidimensional and critical-constructivist approach to local integration (LI), emphasizing the interdependence among dimensions (Ager & Strang, 2008; Kymlicka, 1995). Its scope lies in providing an analytically structured lens through which to examine how institutional frameworks, policy orientations, and discursive constructions shape migrants' integration processes, with particular attention to the inconsistencies between formal commitments and lived realities.

By drawing on the works of İdil Atak, Will Kymlicka, Mehrunnisa Ahmad Ali, Andrea R. Flynn, Ransford Danso, and Luke Rawling, this analytical approach enables a comprehensive understanding of integration as a process shaped by both structural conditions and experiential factors. Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The framework prioritizes a critical perspective that may underrepresent policy-oriented or quantitative approaches, particularly in the economic dimension. Additionally, while it conceptualizes the four dimensions as interconnected, the relationships among them remain analytically complex and

not always fully specified in existing literature. Finally, its reliance on selected case studies and predominantly Canadian-focused literature may limit the transferability of its findings to other national contexts.

This research combines academic rigor with narrative sensitivity, offering a critical reading of local integration grounded in empirical narratives. The findings reveal multiple interconnected patterns shaping local integration, particularly structural ruptures between legal inclusion and other dimensions of integration. These tensions are especially visible in the economic sphere, where formal legal recognition coexists with labor market exclusion, credential devaluation, and persistent economic precarity, significantly affecting participants' agency and psychological well-being.

2. Contextual Framework

Legal and Political Framework

The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (S.C. 2001, c. 27)[3] states that the Canadian government promotes the successful integration of permanent residents into Canada, while recognizing that integration involves mutual obligations for new immigrants and Canadian society. For this purpose, the government will work in cooperation with the provinces to secure better recognition of the foreign credentials of permanent residents and their more rapid integration into society[4]. However, to achieve successful integration, it is necessary to emphasize not only social indicators (the quantitative aspect of integration) but also the qualitative aspect, including the emotional aspect. The latter plays a preponderant role; the first months are crucial to establishing a solid LI.

Demographics and Characteristics of the Afghan Population in Toronto

In Canada, the Afghan Community consists of 62450 people. Since August 2021, Canada has welcomed 28470 Afghans. However, 27,420 Afghans are settled in Toronto CMA[5]. Afghans

[3]Canada. *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, S.C. 2001, c. 27. Last amended August 19, 2024. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-2.5/.

[4] Citizenship and Immigration Canada. *Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, 2012*. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2012. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2012/cic/Ci1-2012-eng.pdf

[5] Statistics Canada. "Immigrant Population by Selected Places of Birth, Admission Category and Period of Immigration, 2021 Census." Last modified October 20, 2022. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/dv-vd/imm/index-en.cfm.

are not a homogeneous group, with a wide variety of religious beliefs, educational levels, and lifestyles.

Integration Challenges with a Gender Perspective

The primary dilemma facing Afghans in Canada is maintaining their traditions and adapting to Canadian culture, especially when it comes to young Afghan women regarding issues related to the use of the veil and intergenerational relationships. As stated by Shiva Nourpanah, among the main problems facing Afghan refugees are language, access to services, and discrimination, which hinder full integration[6].

According to Ravi Pendakur[7], previous research indicates that Afghan immigrants and their children encounter settlement challenges arising from displacement, language barriers, health issues, limited education, restricted access to services, and discrimination. In Canada, Afghan immigrants have faced unfavorable employment outcomes and lower wages compared to other immigrant groups. Additionally, their home-ownership rates remain notably low. However, the situation diverges for Afghan immigrant daughters, who perform significantly better than female immigrants overall. These findings underscore varying levels of horizontal inequality, with Afghan women experiencing significant disparities, while men encounter mixed results, potentially due to labor market barriers[8]. Al-Rahim Moosa highlights how Afghan refugee youth in Canada navigate tensions between preserving aspects of Afghan culture and adapting to Western societal norms. While many participants valued maintaining strong intergenerational and cultural ties[9].

3. Research Paradigm: Ontological, Epistemological, and Methodological considerations

As can be seen, despite Canada's efforts to integrate refugees from Afghanistan, including from a gender perspective, there are still certain structures where agency is limited in the area

[6] Nourpanah, Shiva. "A Study of the Experiences of Integration and Settlement of Afghan Government-Assisted Refugees in Halifax, Canada." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 30, no. 1 (2013): 57–66. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48649600.

[7]Pendakur, R. 2017. " Settlement and Labour Force Outcomes for Afghan Immigrants and their Children in Canada." WIDER Working Paper 2017/189. Helsinki: UNU-WIDER.

[8]Atak, Idil, Claire Linley-Moore, and Julie Kim. "Canada's Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees: Advancing Foreign Policy Objectives and the Status Quo?" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 14 (2020): 2971–2988. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1724423

[9] Moosa, Al-Rahim. "Cultural Reflections of Afghan Youth Living in Canada." *Forced Migration Review*, no. 70 (2022). https://www.fmreview.org/moosa/

of local integration (LI). Young Afghan women in Great Toronto Area face complex integration challenges rooted in cultural tensions, gender expectations, and limited recognition by the host society. These challenges include intergenerational conflicts, pressures to integrate, restricted access to services, and barriers in the labor market, all of which undermine the legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of local integration. As a result, local integration imposes considerable demands on both individuals and receiving societies [10]. According to Gary Craig and Maggie O'Neill, institutional and local government policies may contribute to rendering racism and ethnic inequalities invisible, thereby undermining the social inclusion and welfare of minority ethnic groups despite the formal existence of equality and integration frameworks[11]. In the case of young Afghan women, this can trigger dynamics of racism, sexism, and broader forms of discrimination, affecting specific social groups.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the structural and everyday conditions that hinder the local integration (LI) of young Afghan women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Subsequently, the research question is: What are the main challenges shaping the local integration process of newly arrived Afghan women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) across legal, social, economic, and cultural dimensions?

From this ontological perspective, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted to capture the lived experiences of five young Afghan women through semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions, and storytelling techniques.

Methodologically, this study employed open-ended questions designed to explore the integration trajectories of five newcomer participants aged 18–24, allowing each young Afghan woman to narrate her experiences in her own words. Given that the participants were in the early stages of local integration, their subjective assessments of settlement and satisfaction with life in Canada were considered essential for understanding how integration challenges emerge and are experienced during the initial months after arrival. While six months may be too early to fully understand settlement experiences, this period nevertheless

[10] UNHCR. "Local Integration." Accessed September 17, 2025https://www.unhcr.org/local-integration-49c3646c101.html.

[11] Craig, Gary, and Maggie O'Neill. "It's Time to Move on from 'Race'? The Official 'Invisibilisation' of Minority Ethnic Disadvantage." In *Social Policy Review 25: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy*, edited by Catherine Bochel and Guy Powell, 93–112. Bristol: Policy Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447312741.003.0005.

provides an important foundation and baseline against which later outcomes may be assessed [12]. The challenges inherent in Local Integration (LI) were understood not as isolated individual experiences, but as processes embedded within broader sociopolitical structures.

The participants' names have been modified to protect their identities, in accordance with the security considerations outlined in the research protocol approved by the York University Research Ethics Committee: Lema (18), Zala (20), Helai (20), Muska (20), and Setara (24).

In order to analyze the narratives of young Afghan women in the early stages of local integration in the GTA, the methodology treated interviews as narratives through which participants interpreted their integration experiences in a subjective way. This approach preserved participants' voices and enabled a deeper understanding of how individuals construct and interpret their experiences within broader integration processes.

Furthermore, these narratives were analyzed through the conceptual framework of Local Integration as defined by the UNHCR. By incorporating storytelling techniques, the research recognized narratives as meaningful forms through which migrants interpret and communicate their experiences[13]. In this way, the interviews were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis[14]. This also allowed connections to be drawn between individual experiences and broader structural factors.

The analytical categories emerged through an interpretive process moving from individual narratives to broader thematic and conceptual patterns. Participants' experiences were first coded according to recurring themes across the legal, cultural, social, and economic dimensions of local integration. These thematic patterns were then interpreted critically to identify underlying structural tensions and forms of recognition, exclusion, and negotiation, ultimately leading to the construction of broader interpretive categories such as "functional invisibility," "negotiated visibility," "negotiated belonging," "economic invisibility," and the "labyrinth of recognition".

[12]Statistics Canada. "A Portrait of Early Settlement Experiences: The First Six Months." *Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada*, 2005. Accessed September 22, 2025. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-614-x/2005001/findings-resultats/4079122-eng.htm#cont.

[13]Bönisch-Brednich, Brigitte. "Analysing Migrant Narratives as an Ethnographic Project: Academic Representation as Storytelling." In *Migrant Narratives: Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*, 1–13. London: Routledge, 2023.

[14] Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

4. Theoretical Framework

Local integration (LI) must be understood as an interdependent process in which legal, cultural, social, and economic factors interact and reinforce one another. First of all, the legal dimension of integration constitutes the starting point for understanding the formal conditions under which migrants access rights and protection mechanisms. In this regard, the analysis by İdil Atak, Claire Linley-Moore, and Julie Kim (2023) on Canada's implementation of the Global Compacts demonstrates that, although states adopt normative frameworks aligned with international standards, their practical application is often partial and shaped by domestic political priorities.

This gap between normative commitment and effective implementation reveals that legal integration does not depend solely on the existence of legal instruments, but also on state willingness and the administrative structures that govern their execution. In this context, deficiencies in legal integration emerge from the tension between a universalist discourse of rights and selective practices that constrain actual access to them.

At the cultural level, integration has largely been approached through the paradigm of multiculturalism, which promotes the recognition of cultural diversity within host societies. The work of Mitchell, Leblanc, and Patel (2023) provides a descriptive account of this process, portraying cultural integration as historically progressive and oriented toward harmonious coexistence. However, this perspective remains limited insofar as it does not sufficiently problematize the tensions inherent in this model. In contrast, Will Kymlicka (2014) argues that multiculturalism faces fundamental critiques, particularly regarding its tendency to essentialize cultural identities and oversimplify the complexity of migrant experiences. These critiques highlight that formal recognition does not necessarily translate into effective inclusion. Consequently, deficiencies in cultural integration can be understood as the result of a dissonance between the formal recognition of diversity and social practices that continue to reproduce symbolic hierarchies and forms of exclusion.

The social dimension of integration focuses on the mechanisms through which migrants gain access to support networks, services, and opportunities for participation in the host society. The study by Mehrunnisa Ahmad Ali, Shamiram Zendo, and Shaina Somers (2022) examines the structures and strategies that underpin social integration, particularly in the context of privately sponsored and government-assisted refugee programs. Beyond these institutional

mechanisms, it is essential to consider how belonging and exclusion are socially constructed. In this regard, the critical approach of Andrea R. Flynn (2011) highlights how migration categories and national discourses shape the ways in which migrants are perceived and incorporated into society. These discursive constructions directly influence access to opportunities and the possibility of developing a sense of belonging. Thus, deficiencies in social integration are not limited to the availability of programs or services, but reflect a deeper gap between institutional inclusion and lived inclusion.

In the economic dimension, integration is typically assessed through indicators such as employment, income, and labor market participation. The approach of Luke Rawling (2025) reflects this orientation, proposing policies aimed at improving economic integration through increased efficiency and labor market outcomes. However, this perspective tends to focus on measurable outcomes without fully addressing the structural inequalities that shape labor market participation. In contrast, the work of Ransford Danso (2002) demonstrates that initial settlement experiences are often characterized by significant challenges, including barriers to employment, underemployment, and precarious working conditions. These dynamics reveal that economic integration cannot be reduced to mere labor market participation, but must also be analyzed in terms of job quality and equity of opportunity. In this sense, deficiencies in this dimension reflect broader structural constraints that limit sustainable integration.

5. Findings: Dynamics of Local Integration among Newly Arrived Young Afghan Women in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)

5.1. A Dimensional Approach to Local Integration

This section examines the multidimensional nature of local integration among newly arrived young Afghan women (aged 18–24) in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), drawing on the analytical framework proposed by UNHCR. The analysis of integration as a multidimensional process has been well established in the literature, particularly in the work of Ager and Strang (2008), whose framework conceptualizes integration as spanning key domains such as access to employment, housing, education, and health, as well as rights, social connections, and structural barriers. Building on this approach, this study explores four core dimensions—legal, cultural, social, and economic—highlighting how these domains are experienced, negotiated, and contested in everyday life[15].

[15] Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2 (June 2008): 166–191, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016

5.1.1. At the Legal Dimension

Canada's immigration framework has historically emphasized policies of multicultural recognition and ethnocultural inclusion. In 1971, Canada became the first nation in the world to officially adopt a multiculturalism policy, under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau aiming to preserve the cultural heritage of citizens and recognize the historical contributions of the various "ethnic groups" that make up society. Furthermore, the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 and the Canadian Multiculturalism Law in 1988, all of which address the protection of linguistic and cultural rights, and the fight against discrimination. These legal instruments grant immigrants and refugees a set of rights to preserve their identities and facilitate their integration into the host society[16]. However, while these measures institutionalized cultural recognition, they did not necessarily eliminate structural inequalities affecting migrant and refugee populations.

Some critical voices such as those of Idil Atak, Claire Linley-Moore, Julie (Ha Young) Kim (2023), who state that in the legal field there is still much to be done despite the fact that Canada is a paradigm to follow in matters of local integration. These authors state that the trajectory of domestic policy remains largely independent from the Global Compacts. The Compacts have not been translated into concrete and deliberate action within Canada and remain unknown at the field-level governance of migration. In addition, the GCs do not drive policy change or new practices within Canada. This inaction may be explained by the government's suggestion that current Canadian policies are aligned with the GC principles and actions.

Nevertheless, migrants' lived experience and research clearly show otherwise. Canada needs to use the GCs as a framework to analyze where it can continue to improve its programs and policies at the domestic level, as this would ultimately increase accountability, avoid stagnant programs, and enhance the protection for migrants, including refugees in Canada. According to the study presented by Atak, Linley-Moore, and Kim (2023), Canada's domestic migration policy remains largely disconnected from the UN Global Compacts given that migrants and other key actors confirmed the cracks in Canada's migration and refugee systems as many systemic and structural issues and barriers faced by migrant women to secure legal status and access services continue to persist[17]. This disjuncture becomes particularly visible in the experiences of migrant women, whose access to legal protection and social services continues

[16] May, Paul. 2022. "Le Canada : pays de 'l'immigration choisie' ?" *Hommes & Migrations* 1336: 196–203. https://doi.org/10.4000/hommesmigrations.13743

to be mediated by intersecting forms of gendered and structural vulnerability. According to Atak, Linley-Moore, and Kim (2023), Canada's domestic migration policy remains largely disconnected from the UN Global Compacts, as systemic barriers affecting migrant women continue to persist. This suggests that Canada's multicultural framework, while symbolically inclusive, does not automatically translate into substantive equality for migrant populations.

Thematic Patterns of Legal Integration

This section examined the legal dimension of integration based on interviews conducted with young Afghan women (refugees and immigrants) aged 18–24. The analysis aimed to understand their experiences within the legal dimension of Local Integration (LI) and how they navigated the Canadian legal framework, moving from the perceived security of legal status to the everyday frictions of bureaucratic processes. Particular attention is given to the following analytically identified patterns: the *Paradox of Immediate Security*; *Structural Rupture and the Invisible Wall*; *Transition to Legal Agency: From Recipients to Mediators*; and *Invisible Rights and Informational Gaps*.

1. The Paradox of Immediate Security

A dominant pattern across the narratives is the sense of relief and "early peace" provided by the speed of the Canadian administrative system. This formal belonging is experienced as an institutional embrace that validates their presence in the country almost immediately.

- **The PR Card as a Milestone:** For Zala (20) and Lema (18), receiving Permanent Residency (PR) was the first tangible sign of a "new life." Lema (18) recalls being "pretty happy" because it arrived just one month after landing, a speed that provided immediate psychological stability.
- **Perception of Welcome:** Muska (20) links her legal status to a sense of proactive support, stating: "There was people that they were willing to help us... to help us to grow or to find home or to, you know, to pursue our studies." This suggests that, at the legal level, integration is initially felt as a collective effort where the state and community organizations work in tandem to secure the newcomer's status.

[17]Atak, Idil, Claire Linley-Moore, and Julie Kim. "Canada's Implementation of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2023): 453–474. https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/42/4/453/7284369.

2. Structural Rupture: The "Canadian GPA" and the Invisible Wall

A significant biographical rupture occurs when the participants' previous lives—specifically their academic history in Afghanistan—encounter the rigidity of Canadian institutions. Here, the law acts as a gatekeeper rather than a bridge, creating a "reset" in their life trajectories.

- **The Rejection of the Past:** Setara (24) and Muska (20) describe a moment of profound frustration when their high school certifications were dismissed. Muska (20) explains the institutional barrier: "I had my certification for my high school from back home... they said no, they needed a Canadian GPA from an adult school or any institute here."

- **Biographical Reset:** This requirement for a "Canadian GPA" is not merely a bureaucratic detail; it is experienced as a legal boundary that ignores their prior efforts. It forces these young women into a state of "educational waiting," where they must prove their worthiness through local standards, delaying their transition into adulthood and professional life.

3. Transition to Legal Agency: From Recipients to Mediators

Despite the obstacles, the narratives reveal a powerful pattern of resilience where the women move from being "legal subjects" to "active agents." They utilize their own navigation of the system to empower others who are still "lost."

- **Informal Mediation:** Helai (20) describes how she and her sister became vital links for other families during their initial stay in hotels. She recalls helping those who "didn't understand the language" or were "lost" during the PR process. By translating and explaining paperwork, they transformed their personal integration into a tool for community survival.
- **Civic Commitment as Integration:** Lema (18)'s decision to join a non-profit to "tell them [immigrants] what their legal rights are and what they can do when they arrive" represents the highest form of legal integration. She no longer just *receives* rights; she *claims and distributes* them, showing that agency is a bridge between legal status and social belonging.

4. The "Invisible" Rights and Informational Gaps

A consistent pattern of "unawareness" exists regarding the specificities of refugee law. The participants feel "respected" by the system, but their understanding of the legal framework is often surface-level, relying on trust rather than literacy.

- **Status Ambiguity:** When asked about their specific rights as refugees, the recurring response among the young women was a candid: "I think I'm not too aware of it" (Zala (20), Setara (24)). This indicates that while the *result* of the law (the PR card) is clear, the *process* and specific protections remain opaque.
- **Dependency on Intermediaries:** This lack of legal literacy makes integration highly dependent on "luck"—the quality of the teacher, caseworker, or volunteer they encounter. As Muska (20) noted, having "people willing to help" was the deciding factor in feeling that her rights were respected, highlighting that for these women, the law is only as good as the person explaining it.

Overarching Theme: Recognition Beyond Status

At the legal level, the autobiographical narratives reveal that while Canada's framework is formally efficient in granting status, it creates a "functional invisibility" **(**a condition in which migrants are legally recognized yet institutionally stripped of the social value attached to their prior experiences and qualifications). regarding the participants' previous lives. The rejection of the Afghan GPA acts as a symbolic erasure of their prior identity, mirroring the "informational gaps" found at the cultural level.

Following the critique of Atak, Linley-Moore, and Kim (2023), these stories confirm that legal integration is not a finished state reached upon receiving a PR card. Instead, it is a negotiated process of seeking recognition. As Muska (20)'s experience shows, the "Canadian GPA" is not just a grade; it is a legal barrier that defines who can progress. Ultimately, the transition from 'protected refugee' to 'legal advocate' is best seen in the experiences of Lema (18) and Helai (20); their journeys demonstrate that for these young women, true integration is found in the agency they exercise to overcome the very systems that welcomed them. Their agency emerges not as evidence of institutional success, but as a response to the structural limitations embedded within the integration system itself.

5.1.2. At the Cultural Dimension

Canada promotes cultural integration through multiculturalism. This approach strengthens both the social fabric and the economic development of a country. Connor Mitchell, Sophia Leblanc, Nathan Patel argue that: Canada's commitment to multiculturalism has yielded numerous benefits, both socially and economically. A diverse population brings a wealth of perspectives, talents, and skills to the country, enhancing creativity and innovation across various sectors. This diversity fosters economic growth and prosperity, positioning Canada competitively on the global stage. Studies have shown that diverse workplaces are more productive and adaptable, resulting in a significant economic advantage. Additionally, the exposure to different cultures enriches the social fabric, promoting cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and a more inclusive society[18]. While multiculturalism is frequently presented as a mechanism for promoting innovation, economic growth, and social cohesion, such narratives often assume that cultural integration occurs smoothly and equally for all groups. This optimistic perspective risks overlooking the structural inequalities that shape migrants' lived experiences, particularly for refugee women whose cultural and religious identities may not always be fully recognized within public and institutional spaces. Consequently, the discourse of multicultural inclusion may coexist with subtle forms of exclusion, where integration is encouraged symbolically but negotiated unevenly in everyday life.

Finally, in retrospect, it seems clear that early theories of multiculturalism did not adequately address the specific challenges that religion raises. Will Kymlicka, a Canadian born British author says, this is certainly true of the "Canadian school" of multiculturalism, reflected in the work of people like Taylor, Tully, Carens and my own work, which was heavily shaped by the claims of the Quebecois and Aboriginal peoples, neither of whom mobilize around faith-based claims. Even immigrant groups in Canada have not historically mobilized around religion, at least not until very recently. Multiculturalism in the Canadian context has therefore been theorized in terms of language, territory, race, ethnicity and indigeneity, rather than religion. This inattention to religion has been rightly criticized by many scholars[19].This suggests that people belonging to certain religious beliefs, in this case young Afghan women,

[18]Mitchell, Connor, Sophia Leblanc, and Nathan Patel. 2023. *Immigration and Cultural Integration in Canada: Historical Perspective, Current Realities, and Future Outlook*. *International Journal of Social Science and Research* 1 (2): 1–30. Accessed on page 4. https://www.univpubl.com/public/uploads/20231014/e9fd1d5a13638e4258526c0c1e83ce9d.pdf

[19] Kymlicka, Will. 2014. *The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism: Theories, Policies, Ethos*. RSCAS Working Paper 2014/59. European University Institute. Accessed on page 19. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/31451

may feel isolated by the lack of institutional recognition given the lack of public policies within the Canadian multicultural approach that protect or promote religious expression in public or educational spaces. This could lead young Afghan women to feel invisible or misunderstood if their religious practices are not seen as a legitimate part of cultural diversity.

Thematic Patterns of Cultural Integration

This section examined the cultural dimension of integration based on interviews conducted with young Afghan women (refugees and immigrants) aged 18–24. The analysis aimed to understand their experiences within the cultural dimension of Local Integration (LI), with particular attention to the following identified patterns: *Perception of Respect and Religious Freedom, The "Hijab Shock" and Inter-Migrant Tensions, Agency Through Cultural Exchange, and Informational Gaps and Cultural Invisibility.*

1. Perception of Respect and Religious Freedom

A recurring pattern across the narratives is the generally positive assessment of how customs and religious beliefs are respected in Canada. Participants frequently link this respect to the country's identity as a multicultural nation.

- **Reciprocal Respect**: Zala (20) explains that respect in Canada is a mutual process; she feels that by respecting others' cultures and languages, she receives the same "open-minded" treatment in return.
- **Social Recognition**: Setara (24) and Muska (20) perceive their culture as being well-known and respected by the vast majority of the population, attributing this to Canada's multicultural status.
- **Institutional Welcome**: Helai (20)reports that her employment experiences allowed her to visit diverse religious sites, such as Indian and Chinese temples, finding all of them respectful and welcoming.

2. The "Hijab Shock" and Inter-Migrant Tensions

Despite the general narrative of inclusion, Lema (18)'s story reveals a significant biographical rupture. Her experience highlights that multicultural harmony is not always consistent in everyday social interactions.

- **The Incident**: After deciding to wear the hijab for the first time in Canada during Ramadan, Lema (18) was confronted by a classmate who called her a "terrorist".
- **Inter-Migrant Conflict**: A critical finding is that this aggression came from another immigrant rather than a Canadian-born citizen, an event she described as "pretty surprising".
- **Autobiographical Interpretation**: This encounter caused a rupture in her social circle, leading Lema (18) to terminate the friendship and navigate a "shocking" discovery of prejudice within her environment.

3. Agency Through Cultural Exchange

Participants demonstrate resilience and agency by using cultural markers—such as food, clothing, and dance—as tools for integration and social connection.

- **Cultural Sharing**: Zala (20) and Setara (24) actively share their heritage by cooking traditional food and discussing their country at community events.
- **Professional Integration**: Helai (20)integrated her culture into her professional life by working at an Afghan restaurant and sharing traditional music and dance with friends and colleagues.
- **Civic Engagement**: Lema (18) utilizes her role in a non-profit organization as a platform for storytelling, sharing her migration journey and showcasing cultural diversity.

4. Informational Gaps and Cultural Invisibility

A fourth pattern emerges regarding the lack of institutional guidance on cultural and religious rights, which often leads to moments of confusion or feeling "invisible."

- **Administrative Confusion**: Similar to the legal level, participants report a lack of clear information on how their religious practices are protected in public spaces.
- **Adaptation Pressure**: Some participants, like Zala (20) and Lema (18), felt a "little bit" of pressure to adapt, especially regarding language and cultural norms at the beginning of their journey.

Overaching Theme: Negotiated Visibility

In this context, the autobiographical narratives revealed that although Canada's multicultural framework is formally robust and rights-oriented, it does not always translate into full or

consistent access for refugees and immigrants. Building on Kymlicka (2014) critique regarding the limited attention given to religion within Canadian multiculturalism, it can be argued that insufficient institutional recognition may contribute to forms of religious invisibility among minority groups[20]. Lema (18)'s experience with the "hijab shock" confirms this risk, showing that religious practices are not always seen as a "legitimate part of cultural diversity" by all members of society.

These lived experiences align with the critiques raised by Mitchell, Leblanc, and Patel (2023), who argue that cultural integration is a dual process shaped by historical perspectives and current social realities. The identified pattern shows that for these young women, integration does not involve a "pressure to adapt" in a forced way, but rather a voluntary process of negotiation where cultural exchange acts as a bridge of resilience.

In conclusion, the cultural level of integration for this group is defined by negotiated visibility. While participants celebrate the freedom to share their heritage, the incidents of discrimination and informational gaps serve as a reminder of the gap between theoretical multiculturalism and the lived reality of navigating religious symbols in public spaces. Integration is thus confirmed to be an ongoing process of seeking social recognition beyond formal policy.

5.1.3. At the Social Dimension

According to Mehrunnisa Ahmad Ali**,** Shamiram Zendo & Shaina Somers (2021), drawing on the ideas of White (2002) and Borgatti & Ofem (2010) about social integration affirm that social integration requires social networks, which is defined as a web of social relations or resources that surround individuals, groups, or organizations and the characteristics of those ties. In addition, they argue social network theorists have examined antecedents, evolutions, and consequences of social networks, as well as attributes of those within such networks, and how they constrain or provide opportunities for its members. Their unit of analysis has often been the network itself, rather than individuals and their processes of entry into or construction of new networks[21].

[20]Kymlicka, Will. 2014. *The Essentialist Critique of Multiculturalism: Theories, Policies, Ethos*. RSCAS Working Paper 2014/59. European University Institute. Accessed on page 19. https://hdl.handle.net/1814/31451

[21] Ali, Mehrunnisa Ahmad, Shamiram Zendo, and Shaina Somers. 2022. "Structures and Strategies for Social Integration: Privately Sponsored and Government Assisted Refugees." *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 20 (4): 473–485. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2021.1938332

However, Andrea R. Flynn (2011) argues that the Canadian nation has both literal and symbolic boundaries, and illustrate that both types of boundaries are often perceived as being threatened by newcomers from diverse backgrounds to the end of requiring safeguarding by the Canadian state. These cases also reveal the fact that immigrants occupy a contested place in Canadian society, and that their admission as permanent residents do not automatically render them uncontested members of the Canadian national community in the eyes of Canadian citizens or the Canadian state[22]. This means that while Canada certainly promotes the social integration of refugees and migrants, it is nevertheless hampered by both structural dynamics and exclusionary national narratives.

Thematic Patterns of Social Integration

This section examined the social dimension of integration based on interviews conducted with young Afghan women (refugees and immigrants) aged 18–24. The analysis explores how participants built social capital and negotiated their sense of belonging, moving from the perceived safety of settlement organizations to the often challenging dynamics of the public sphere. It also seeks to understand their experiences within the social dimension of Local Integration (LI), with particular attention to the following analytically identified patterns: *Peer-to-Peer Immigrant Solidarity and the "Instant Connection"*; *the "Neighborhood Void" and the Rupture of Communitarianism*; *Resilience in the Face of "Everyday Racism" and the "Refugee" Label*; and *Institutional Anchors as the "First Home."*

1. Peer-to-Peer Immigrant Solidarity and the "Instant Connection"

A dominant pattern is that social integration rarely begins with the native-born population; instead, it flourishes within "immigrant-to-immigrant" networks. These connections provide a unique form of empathy that bypasses cultural differences through a shared experience of displacement.

- **The Immigrant Bridge:** Lema (18) identifies a surprising social pattern where her closest ties are not necessarily with other Afghans, but with newcomers from diverse backgrounds. She explains: "Most of the people I was able to connect instantly were other immigrants... they were able to help me to adapt into the culture."

[22] Andrea R. Flynn. *Constructing Categories, Imagining a Nation: A Critical Qualitative Analysis of Canadian Immigration Discourse*. Tesis doctoral, University of Western Ontario, 2011. Dirigida por Danièle Bélanger. Accessed on page 3. https://doi.org/10.71858/123456.

- **The School as a Social Lab:** For Zala (20), social networks were built through institutional proximity. She reports having made friends "through community centers and school," environments that act as controlled spaces where social support is accessible and safe, allowing for the gradual development of trust.

2. The "Neighborhood Void" and the Rupture of Communitarianism

A significant biographical tension emerges from the contrast between the collective social structure of Afghanistan and the individualistic "neighborhood void" in Canada. This represents a silent, invisible barrier to deep social integration.

- **Residential Isolation:** Lema (18) describes a profound cultural shock regarding her immediate surroundings, noting the lack of spontaneous social bonds: "I don't know my next door neighbor... if it was Afghanistan it would be strange because we would be already like the neighborhood (familiar)."

- **The Individualistic Shift:** This "void" is experienced as a loss of the communal safety net. The participants find themselves integrated into schools or jobs, yet socially isolated in the very places they live, highlighting a fragmented form of belonging where public life is active but private neighborhood life is silent.

3. Resilience against "Everyday Racism" and the "Refugee" Label

Despite the official multicultural narrative, the participants' stories contain "biographical stings"—incidents of discrimination that force them to renegotiate their place in society and their identity as legitimate residents.

- **The Exclusionary "Refugee" Label:** Setara (24) recounts a painful encounter while working as a sales associate, where a customer's prejudice became a tool for exclusion: "The person was like acting, 'oh, like all the people here, they're refugees and we belong to this country'." This experience highlights a pattern where the term "refugee" is used to strip the newcomer of their legitimacy.

- **The Language Barrier as a Weapon:** Lema (18) describes a workplace aggression where she was shamed for not speaking a language (Punjabi) that was not her own, being called "incompetent" despite her efforts to communicate in English.

- **Inter-Migrant Tensions:** As seen in the "Hijab Shock" incident, social exclusion can also come from within the immigrant community. When a friend called Lema (18) a "terrorist" for her religious symbols, it caused a permanent rupture, proving that social integration is a fragile negotiation even among peers.

4. Institutional Anchors as the "First Home"

A consistent pattern shows that the transition from "outsider" to "community member" is almost always mediated by specialized organizations. These institutions provide the first sense of being "seen" and "welcomed" in a professional and human way.

- **The Afghan Women Organization (AWO):** For Setara (24) and Muska (20), this organization provided the foundation for their social life: "They were trying for me to settle and to find a school... at that time I felt most welcome here"

- **Building Confidence through Service:** Helai (20)emphasizes that her social integration was accelerated by volunteering at the YMCA. This active participation gave her the "courage and confidence" to interact with the host society beyond her own ethnic circle, turning volunteering into a bridge for social growth.

Overarching Theme: Negotiated Belonging

At the social level, the autobiographical narratives revealed that integration is a "Negotiated Belonging" These young women do not simply "blend in"; they actively construct a new social identity while navigating a landscape of both extreme kindness and systemic exclusion. As argued by Ali, Zendo, and Somers (2022), social integration is frequently hampered by exclusionary national narratives. This is evident in Muska (20)'s encounter with the "we belong here" rhetoric. However, the participants demonstrate immense resilience by transforming their initial "refugee" status into one of active citizenship, as seen in Lema (18) and Helai's (20) commitment to volunteering. Ultimately, their social integration is defined

by a paradox: they feel most at home when they are helping others find their own, turning their migration journey into a source of social capital.

5.1.4. At the Economic Dimension

Abu-Laban et al. (1999, p. 159) have suggested in their study of six different refugee groups in Alberta, adequate personal income is a key 'indicator of successful settlement in Canada.' Both financial security and economic independence are bedrocks of any meaningful integration in a western industrialized society like Canada[23]. Luke Rawlin (2025) suggests that Canadian experience helps overcome informational deficiencies surrounding immigrants' qualifications and that the initial labor market placement of newcomers may significantly affect their long-term earnings and career trajectories. Consequently, many immigrants continue to face difficulties accessing employment despite qualifications comparable to those of Canadian-born workers. In this context, employer hiring practices may limit immigrants' access to the labor market, even when their credentials closely match those of native-born applicants[24].

In the same sense, Ransford Danso suggests that One major reason for this denial stems from the devaluation or non-recognition of credentials earned outside Canada as well as the ubiquitous demand for so-called 'Canadian experience'[25].

Under the Carney administration, the goal is to build a strong economy by attracting the world's best talent and addressing key labor shortages. In July 2025, the government announced the allocation of more than CAD 3.2 billion over three years to more than 520 organizations outside of Quebec to improve the integration of newcomers, including their entry into the labor market, and reduce labor shortages. With greater economic integration, newcomers can quickly apply their skills, fill critical job openings, and boost productivity.

[23] Ransford Danso. "From 'There' to 'Here': An Investigation of the Initial Settlement Experiences of Ethiopian and Somali Refugees in Toronto." *GeoJournal* 56 (2002): 3–14. Accessed on page 10. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021748701134.

[24] Rawling, Luke. 2025. *Improving the Economic Integration of Canadian Immigrants*. JDI Policy Paper 25-0601, Queen's University, Department of Economics. https://jdi.queensu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Rawling-Improving-the-Economic-Integration-of-Immigrants-JDI-Policy-Insights.pdf

[25] Ransford Danso. "From 'There' to 'Here': An Investigation of the Initial Settlement Experiences of Ethiopian and Somali Refugees in Toronto." *GeoJournal* 56 (2002): 3–14. Accessed on page 10. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021748701134.

Local organizations will also be funded to provide tailored services that recognize regional considerations and needs, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach[26].

Thematic Patterns of Economic Integration

This section examined the economic dimension of integration based on interviews conducted with young Afghan women aged 18–24. The analysis explores the tension between participants' academic aspirations and the realities of a labour market that often devalues their prior experience and qualifications, with particular attention to the psychological and social consequences of financial precariousness. It further seeks to understand their experiences within the economic dimension of Local Integration (LI), focusing on the following analytically identified patterns: *the "Canadian Experience" as a Systemic Gatekeeper*; *the Psychosomatic Impact of Financial Precariousness*; *the Transition from State Dependency to Survival Agency*; and *the Resilience of Persistence (Economic Agency)*

1. The "Canadian Experience" as a Systemic Gatekeeper

A dominant and recurring pattern is the institutionalized rejection of foreign or "fresh" talent. The requirement for local experience acts as an "invisible wall" that prevents young women from utilizing their hard-earned degrees.

- **The Graduation Paradox:** Muska (20) expresses a deep sense of injustice regarding the circular logic of the market: "I just graduated from college but they still want experience... so how can I get experience if I just graduated?". This highlights a biographical rupture where the achievement of a Canadian diploma does not automatically grant access to the professional world.

- **Discounting Human Capital:** Even after two years in the country, the market continues to demand "more," as if their previous life and resilience carried no weight. Muska (20) notes: "It's not so comfortable for me because I have been in the country for two years and I don't have obviously a lot of experience... it's still challenging".

[26]Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Canada Invests in Services to Support Economic Integration and Fill Labour Market Shortages." Government of Canada, July 2025. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2025/07/canada-invests-in-services-to-support-economic-integration-and-fill-labour-market-shortages.html.

2. The Psychosomatic Impact of Financial Precariousness

One of the most profound findings is that economic integration is directly linked to mental health. Financial instability is not just about "lack of money"; it is a catalyst for a total emotional breakdown.

- **The Anatomy of Distress:** Muska (20) provides a harrowing list of the consequences of economic hardship: "Obviously, that will affect us to have depression, to be anxious, to be sad, to get tense, to get mad, to feel bad...".

- **The "Differentiation" Pattern:** A key biographical finding is the feeling of being "differentiated from other people" and the "loss of confidence". When these young women cannot achieve economic independence, they feel they are failing at "being Canadian," leading to a crisis of self-worth that transcends the financial realm.

3. Transition from State Dependency to Survival Agency

While the state provides an initial "safety net" through organizations like IRCC, the participants view this as a temporary bridge that does not lead to long-term economic dignity.

- **The Baseline of Survival:** Most participants received initial support from the "department... I think that was from IRCC" but they quickly realize that this support is insufficient for true social mobility.
- **Survival Jobs vs. Career Goals:** There is a pattern of "underemployment" where high-achieving women work as "sales associates" because they lack the "Canadian foot in the door" for higher-level roles. This creates a hidden frustration: they are integrated into the *workforce*, but not into their *profession*.

4. The Resilience of Persistence (Economic Agency)

Despite the "depression" and "anxiety" mentioned, the participants demonstrate a pattern of tenacious agency. They do not accept economic exclusion as a final state.

- **Strategic Volunteering:** To break the "no experience" cycle, women like Helai (20)and Lema (18) use volunteering (at the YMCA or non-profits) as a strategic

economic tool. They leverage unpaid work to gain the "Canadian credentials" that the market demands.

- **Academic Determination:** The fact that Muska (20) and others continue to graduate despite financial stress shows an aspirational agency. They view education as the only legal-economic weapon to eventually force the doors of the Canadian market open.

Overarching Theme: The Labyrinth of Recognition

At the economic level, the narratives reveal that integration is a "Labyrinth of Recognition." As Rawlin (2025) suggests, Canadian firms have an "implicit bias" against those without local history, regardless of their credentials. This creates what we can call "Economic Invisibility": the women are present in the country, but their professional potential is ignored. In conclusion, economic integration for these young Afghan women is a battle for Dignity over Subsistence. While they are grateful for the IRCC support, their true goal is to escape the "refugee" economic label and be seen as "competent professionals." As Muska (20)'s testimony warns, until the labor market recognizes their resilience as "valid experience," the psychological cost of integration—depression and loss of confidence—will remain a significant barrier to their full participation in Canadian society.

5.2. An Interconected Approach to Local Integration

Initially, this study analyzed the dimensions of local integration as conceptualized by the UNHCR separately for analytical clarity. However, as suggested by Will Kymlicka (1995)[27] these dimensions do not operate in a linear or automatic manner, as progress in one domain—such as legal status—does not necessarily translate into inclusion in others, particularly within the cultural sphere. Consequently, this research adopts an interconnected perspective, as the participants' narratives revealed that legal, cultural, social, and economic dimensions of integration were closely linked. This perspective helps identify points of tension, where formal rights did not necessarily translate into effective integration, as well as areas of mutual reinforcement across dimensions, particularly when multicultural policies fostered recognition and inclusion.

5.2.1. Legal Integration through an Interconnected Approach

[27] Kymlicka, Will. 1995. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Accessed on page 192.

Legal Dimension → Cultural Dimension

In this specific case, Canadian legislation formally grants refugees and immigrants a full set of rights within the framework of Local Integration (LI). However, this legal recognition does not necessarily translate into full cultural recognition. Certain narratives, such as Lema (18)'s, reveal unpleasant experiences related to the visible expression of cultural and religious identity, particularly in relation to wearing the hijab. While recently arrived young women are legally entitled to present themselves in accordance with their cultural practices, everyday social norms do not always align with legal protections.

Legal Dimension – Social Dimension

In this sense, the legal dimension of Local Integration provides comprehensive security in a codified and institutionalized manner, yet it offers limited guidance on how cultural identity is to be protected and recognized in daily interactions. The testimonies suggest that possessing legal status does not automatically result in being socially recognized as an "equal." The label *"refugee"* continues to surface in social encounters as a marker of inferiority, even after formal status has been granted. Although legal status situates individuals "within the system," it does not shield them from experiences of discrimination, such as those reported by Setara (24).

Legal Dimension –Economic Dimension

At the same time, the role of safe institutional spaces should be acknowledged. Some interviewees reported that their sense of belonging was more effectively reinforced within settlement organizations and community institutions than in public spaces more broadly. Furthermore, legal and institutional requirements—such as the demand for a "Canadian GPA" or "Canadian experience"—operate as indirect legal barriers. These mechanisms produce what can be described as a *"biographical reset,"* whereby prior academic and professional trajectories are rendered legally and institutionally invalid. While legal status permits access to the labor market, it often confines agency to conditions of underemployment, economic precariousness, and heightened psychological stress. Muska (20) identified the requirement of "Canadian experience" as a major barrier to labor market entry, particularly after completing her postsecondary education in Canada. Helai (20)and Lema (18) experienced this

requirement more implicitly, responding through strategic volunteering in order to acquire locally recognized experience. Although Setara (24) did not explicitly name the "Canadian experience" requirement, her trajectory of underemployment reflects the structural effects of this gatekeeping mechanism.

5.2.2.Cultural Integration through an Interconnected Approach

Cultural Integration → Legal Dimension

The cultural dimension of Local Integration (LI) emerges from the narratives as a negotiated and relational process, rather than a linear outcome. For young Afghan women, culture is not merely "tradition" but a resource that is continuously negotiated in the context of legal barriers, social isolation, and economic insecurity. Although Canada's multicultural framework formally promotes cultural diversity and freedom of expression, participants' testimonies indicate that cultural integration is profoundly shaped by its interaction with legal status, social recognition, and economic positioning. In this sense, cultural integration operates as a transdimensional space where formal rights, everyday social practices, and structural constraints intersect.

From a legal standpoint, participants benefit from codified protections that enable the expression of cultural and religious identity. However, these protections do not always translate into consistent recognition in daily life. Experiences such as Lema (18)'s—who faced hostility after wearing the hijab—illustrate the gap between legal guarantees and social acceptance. This disconnect reinforces a form of conditional cultural integration, wherein identity must be constantly negotiated rather than openly asserted.

Cultural Integration → Social Dimension

At the social level, cultural integration is closely tied to a sense of belonging and peer recognition. The testimonies of young Afghan women demonstrate that cultural acceptance is more readily experienced in institutional and community spaces—such as settlement organizations, schools, and non-profit settings—than in public or informal contexts. Inter-migrant tensions, microaggressions, and the persistence of stereotypes reveal that cultural difference can become a source of exclusion, even among other migrant groups.

Consequently, cultural integration tends to develop within “safe spaces” that mediate social interaction rather than through spontaneous inclusion in the broader public sphere.

Cultural Integration → Economic Dimension

From an economic perspective, cultural integration is indirectly conditioned by labor market structures that privilege local experience “Canadian Experience”. The pressure to conform linguistically, behaviorally, and professionally to dominant cultural norms reinforces the devaluation of prior identities and trajectories. Underemployment and precarious working conditions further constrain cultural expression, as economic insecurity limits the capacity to assert cultural identity without fear of social or professional repercussions. Thus, cultural integration is intricately linked to economic marginalization.

5.2.3. Social integration through an Interconnected Approach

Social Integration → Legal Dimension

In this case, the voluntary participation of Helai (20)and Lema (18) in organizations such as the YMCA and AWO is enabled by the formal recognition of their legal status. Legal recognition not only grants access to these institutional spaces but also allows these young women to assume mediating roles, supporting newcomers who lack sufficient information about the local integration process. Through this form of engagement, social integration is directly conditioned by legal status, which functions as a prerequisite for participation, agency, and the capacity to facilitate integration pathways for others.

2. Social Integration → Cultural Dimension

Social integration entails processes of intercultural interaction in which encounters with the “other” are either validated or rejected. Initially, social spaces operate as laboratories of cultural exchange. However, these spaces are not free from exclusionary practices and microaggressions, as illustrated by Lema (18)’s experience of being labeled a “terrorist” solely for wearing the hijab. This suggests that individual agency can become easily constrained by structural forms of xenophobia and discrimination, thereby limiting cultural integration. In Lema (18)’s case, such experiences compel her to strategically negotiate how much of her cultural identity she chooses to assert or conceal in order to preserve her social connections.

3. Social Integration → Economic Dimension

Social interaction as a component of social integration is also shaped by employment status and, consequently, by economic capacity. Beyond the household, the workplace becomes a central site of socialization. Within this context, Muska (20) reports that economic precarity makes her feel "different from others" and leads to a "loss of confidence." Evidently, economic conditions shape the quality of social relations: when a young woman is confined to survival employment (such as a sales associate position) and encounters discriminatory treatment—such as a customer stating that "everyone here is a refugee"—her social network becomes increasingly restricted. The absence of economic integration thus generates social isolation, which may ultimately lead to the social invisibilization of these young women.

5.2.4. Economic integration through an Interconnected Approach

Economic Integration → Legal Dimension

The consolidation of economic integration is mediated through the legal dimension, which grants authorization to work but does not guarantee access to the professional labor market. In this case, the acquisition of Permanent Residency (PR) enables access to employment stability. However, a recurring pattern of rupture emerges when the legal–educational system requires a "Canadian GPA," thereby disregarding academic credentials obtained in Afghanistan. As Muska (20) notes, graduating from college constitutes a legal achievement, yet the absence of "Canadian experience" operates as a legal–labor barrier. Here, the law secures lawful residence, while the labor market effectively discounts their accumulated human capital.

Economic Integration → Cultural Dimension

The workplace represents the primary space in which participants' cultural practices are expected to align with dominant Canadian norms. Organizations often penalize limited familiarity with local cultural codes. Muska (20) and Setara (24) describe the workplace as a site of cultural friction, where they are perceived as "others." Economic marginalization reinforces the perception that their cultural backgrounds hold limited value within Canada's "market of identities," leading to pressures toward forced assimilation rather than fostering a healthy form of multicultural integration.

Economic Integration → Social Dimension

Economic conditions further shape the nature of interpersonal relationships within the host society. In Muska (20)'s case, economic precarity adversely affected her mental health, as she describes experiencing "depression, anxiety, and feeling different from others." When economic integration is constrained, the social networks of individuals in situations of human mobility tend to contract. Conversely, economic independence enables these young women to transition from being perceived as "charity beneficiaries" to becoming empowered friends and colleagues, thereby transforming their social status from marginal to central.

6. Conclusions

An in-depth analysis of the local integration (LI) trajectories of five young Afghan women aged 18 to 24 living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) between 2024 and 2025 revealed significant discontinuities across legal, cultural, social, and economic dimensions, particularly between formal legal inclusion and effective economic participation. A multidimensional and interconnected approach made it possible to identify how barriers within one sphere frequently shaped experiences in others, producing uneven trajectories of integration shaped by structural inequalities and everyday experiences of recognition and exclusion.

The findings further demonstrate that local integration cannot be understood as a linear transition from legal admission to social inclusion. Rather, integration emerges as a fragmented, negotiated, and interdependent process in which legal status does not automatically guarantee cultural recognition, social belonging, or economic mobility. In this context, gender inequalities were continuously reproduced and negotiated across interconnected dimensions of integration, revealing how economic precarity affected psychological well-being and social participation, while cultural discrimination influenced broader experiences of visibility and belonging. Consequently, young Afghan women did not passively adapt to Canadian society; instead, they actively negotiated agency, identity, and inclusion across multiple and overlapping dimensions of local integration.

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Appendix A – Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Questions for the interview

Part I: Legal Level

Goal: Understand their experience with Canada's legal and immigration systems.

- What was your experience obtaining legal status in Canada?
- Do you feel your rights as a refugee have been respected?
- Are you aware of your legal rights in Canada?
- Have you faced any legal barriers to accessing services or education?

Part II: Cultural Level

Goal: Learn about their cultural and religious integration.

- Do you feel your customs and religious beliefs are respected in Canada?
- Have you had opportunities to share your culture with others?
- Have you felt pressure to adapt to different cultural norms?
- Do you think your religion is acknowledged as part of Canada's cultural diversity?

Part III: Social Level

Goal: Assess their sense of belonging and social networks.

- Have you been able to build friendships or support networks in Canada?
- Do you feel part of the local community?
- Have you experienced discrimination or social exclusion?
- Do you participate in community activities or social groups?
- What has helped you feel most welcomed?

Part IV: Economic Level

Goal: Explore employment, financial stability, and economic integration.

- Have you been able to find a job since arriving in Canada?
- Were your previous qualifications or work experience recognized?
- Have you encountered challenges due to the "Canadian experience" requirement?
- Do you receive any financial support or job training?
- How does your financial situation affect your overall well-being?

Appendix B – Ethical Approval

YORK
UNIVERSITÉ
UNIVERSITY

Certificate #:	**2025-183**
Approval Period:	**06/24/25-06/24/26**

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ETHICS APPROVAL

To: **Cesar Castilla**
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From: Alison M. Collins-Mrakas, Director, Research Ethics
(on behalf of Gillian Parekh, Chair, Human Participants Review Committee)

Date: **Tuesday, June 24, 2025**

Title: **Local Integration of Afghan women newcomers in Toronto Great Toronto Area (GTA)**

Risk Level: ☒ Minimal Risk ☐ More than Minimal Risk

Level of Review: ☒ Delegated Review ☐ Full Committee Review

I am writing to inform you that this research project, **"Local Integration of Afghan women newcomers in Toronto Great Toronto Area (GTA)"** has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines.

Note that approval is granted for one year. Ongoing research – research that extends beyond one year – must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process by submission of an amendment application to the HPRC prior to its implementation.

Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research ethics (ore@yorku.ca) as soon as possible.

For further information on researcher responsibilities as it pertains to this approved research ethics protocol, please refer to the attached document, **"RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE".**

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at: ore@yorku.ca

Yours sincerely,

Alison M. Collins-Mrakas M.Sc., LLM
Director, Office of Research Ethics

RESEARCH ETHICS: PROCEDURES to ENSURE ONGOING COMPLIANCE

Upon receipt of an ethics approval certificate, researchers are reminded that they are required to ensure that the following measures are undertaken so as to ensure on-going compliance with Senate and TCPS ethics guidelines:

1. **RENEWALS:** Research Ethics Approval certificates are subject to annual renewal. **Failure to renew an ethics approval certificate or** (to notify ORE that no further research involving human participants will be undertaken) will result in the **closure of the protoco**l. No further research activities may be undertaken until such time as a new protocol has been reviewed and approved. Further, it **may result in suspension of research cost fund and access to research funds may be suspended/withheld** ;

2. **AMENDMENTS:** Amendments must be reviewed and approved **PRIOR** to undertaking/making the proposed amendments to an approved ethics protocol;

3. **END OF PROJECT**: ORE must be notified when a project is complete; Failure to submit an "End of Project Report" **may result in suspension of research cost fund and access to research funds may be suspended/withheld.**

4. **ADVERSE EVENTS**: Adverse events must be reported to ORE as soon as possible;

5. **AUDIT:**
    a. More than minimal risk research may be subject to an audit as per TCPS guidelines;
    b. A spot sample of minimal risk research may be subject to an audit as per TCPS guidelines.

FORMS: As per the above, the following forms relating to on-going research ethics compliance are available on the Research website:

- Renewal
- Amendment
- End of Project
- Adverse Event