Chapter 10

Beyond ESOL provision: perspectives on language, intercultural and integration support for Syrian refugees in Ireland

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Abstract

This chapter is the second in this volume (the first being Chapter 5) to report on a research project investigating language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees who are being resettled in towns across Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). Based on the perspectives of ESOL providers, resettlement workers, representatives of NGOs and organizations involved in the IRPP, as well as community-based service providers and volunteers, it explores the language and intercultural supports available to Syrian refugees beyond the official provision of English language training. Its findings indicate the need for intercultural training for those working with refugees, appropriate responses to refugees' diverse needs, and support for sustainable integration in host communities. Emerging linguistic and cultural challenges faced by Syrian refugees in relation to employment, education, and social inclusion are discussed; the findings of this research point to the need for clear policy on refugee resettlement in Ireland.

Refugee resettlement in Ireland

International protection and migration

State-sponsored international protection schemes in Ireland have included the admission of refugees from Hungary in the 1950s, from Chile, Vietnam and Iran in the 1970s and 1980s, and from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo in the 1990s, although support for the resettlement of these refugees has varied (Kinlen 2013). Since 2000, Ireland has participated in a UNHCR-led resettlement programme through which it has accepted an annual quota of up to 200 persons per year (Stanton 2017a). These 'programme refugees' arrive with refugee status and share many of the rights afforded Irish citizens (UNHCR 2013; Arnold and Quinn 2016); the state also provides them with some language and intercultural support (Gusciute et al. 2016). However, linguistic and cultural challenges remain, as shown in research involving Bosnian (Sultan 1999; Halilovic-Pastuovic 2010) Chechen (Rose 2016), Kurdish (Kinlen 2008), and Rohingya refugees (Titley 2010).

Beyond these resettlement programmes, people also arrive in Ireland seeking asylum under

the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Asylum seekers receive far less support than programme refugees. Through the 'Dispersal and Direct Provision' system, established in 2000, asylum seekers are accommodated, often for lengthy periods, in institutionalized centres, receiving a minimal allowance (€21.60 per person per week at time of writing) but severely restricted from accessing employment and third-level education and living in conditions which have raised national and international human rights concerns (Kinlen 2013; Lentin 2016; Ombudsman, 2018). Among the many challenges asylum seekers face, their need for language and intercultural support is evident (UNHCR 2013).

Considering the wider migration context, Ireland has become a linguistically and culturally diverse country since the 1990s. The results of the 2016 Census show that 810,406 people were born outside Ireland (17.3% of the population) and 612,018 people speak a language other than English or Irish at home (CSO 2017). Investigating current supports for Syrian refugees could therefore be relevant to professionals and volunteers who are providing support to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, not only in Ireland but in other European countries which are responding to increased inward migration.

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme

Due to the war in Syria and other crises, over one million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe in 2015 (UNHCR 2018). In response, the Irish government launched the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) in September 2015. Under this scheme, coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE) through the Office for the Promotion of Migrant Integration (OPMI), Ireland committed to accept up to 4,000 people (DJE 2015). The IRPP is the largest refugee programme undertaken by the Irish state; it comprises a 'resettlement' strand, for refugees who are brought from Lebanon and Jordan, and a 'relocation' strand for people who initially arrived in Greece (DJE 2016). The progress of the IRPP has been slow, with less than half the target number of admissions reached to date. Most of those arriving come from Syria; by February 2018, the number of Syrians admitted to Ireland under the IRPP was 1,581 (Stanton 2018).

People arriving under the IRPP spend an initial period in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) where an eight to ten week 'language training and orientation programme' is provided for adults, while children engage in preparation for mainstream education (OPMI 2017). They are then resettled in towns across Ireland. In each location, resettlement is managed by an 'inter-agency working group', chaired by the local authority and involving other 'mainstream service providers', with support from 'NGOs and Local

Community Development Companies' (OPMI 2017). OPMI provides grants to employ a locally based 'resettlement support worker' to organize 'a suite of integration initiatives during the first year post arrival' (Stanton 2017a). ESOL courses for adults are also provided by state-run Education and Training Boards (ETBs) 'for up to twenty hours per week for a period of one year' (OPMI 2017). At local level, the focus of the resettlement programme is on 'preparing refugees for employment and independent living' (Stanton 2017a).

Integration in Ireland

Initial approaches to integration in Ireland identified it as a 'two-way process', concerning 'the ability to participate to the extent that a person needs and wishes in all of the major components of society, without having to relinquish his or her own cultural identity' (Interdepartmental Working Group on the Integration of Refugees in Ireland 1999:9). The subsequent policy statement, *Migrant Nation* (Office of the Minister for Integration 2008), recognized 'interculturalism' in Irish society and the need for migrants to access English language training, education and employment, but it sought to respond to diversity by 'mainstreaming' i.e. through existing services. As a result, official policy amounted at most to a 'laissez-faire' approach' (O'Toole 2018) and, during the economic crisis of the last decade, integration received little political attention or state resources.

A new *Migrant Integration Strategy* was launched by the DJE in 2017. This strategy reiterates that 'Ireland's integration policy is intercultural in nature' and, while its focus is again on 'access to mainstream services for migrants', it proposes 'positive action programmes to address specific needs' (DJE 2017:12). The government has further acknowledged that refugees coming to Ireland under the IRPP 'may have complex needs and may need targeted services' (Stanton 2017b).

Language and intercultural support

As language and cultural knowledge can facilitate integration (Strang and Ager 2010), the provision of linguistic and intercultural support is a key issue in refugee resettlement. Learning the language of the host community is a significant factor in the economic welfare of refugees and migrants (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Irwin *et al.* 2014). In Ireland, English language proficiency has been found to affect employment (Barrett *et al.* 2017; Gusciute *et al.* 2016) and is one of the main challenges for refugees seeking to enter further and higher education (UNHCR 2013). Refugees' access to services and their social connections within local communities can also be enhanced by the development of English language skills

(Carson 2008).

However, since 2008, Ireland's economic difficulties have adversely affected language and intercultural support for refugees and other migrants. English language support for children in primary and secondary schools has been significantly reduced (Moreo and Lentin 2010; Ćatibušić and Little 2014, see also Chapter 8 in this volume). ESOL services for adults, including specific provision for refugees, have also been cut (Gusciute *et al.* 2016; UNHCR 2013). There is a need for greater focus on linguistic and cultural diversity in teacher training (Faas *et al.* 2015; Keane and Heinz 2015) and more inclusive language education policies (Gallagher and Leahy 2014). The availability of interpreting and translation services in Ireland is also limited (McFarlane *et al.* 2009) as is the regulation and training of interpreters (Conlon *et al.* 2012; O'Connor and Ciribuco 2017).

With evidence of increasing racism and Islamophobia in Ireland (European Network Against Racism (ENAR) Ireland 2018; Carr 2016) and particularly negative attitudes towards Muslim and Roma migrants (McGinnity *et al.* 2018), a renewed focus on intercultural understanding is required to support refugees and their host communities. Specific issues affecting refugees, including trauma or fear for separated family members (Irish Refugee Council *et al.* 2018) and other factors which may impact on integration, such as gender, age, vulnerability, and previous educational or work experience, must also be considered (Yako and Biswas, 2014; UNHCR, 2013).

The study

This chapter is based on a research project: *An investigation of language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees in Ireland* which explores the provision of language and intercultural support to Syrian refugees who are resettling in Ireland under the IRPP. As outlined in Chapter 5 ('An investigation of ESOL provision for adult Syrian refugees in Ireland'), it considers the perspectives of fourteen support providers who participated in this study, looking at language and intercultural issues – beyond the provision of official ESOL classes – for Syrian refugees and host communities in five resettlement locations. These participants were recruited through purposive sampling by contacting educational institutions, NGOs and other organizations engaged in refugee resettlement. They include ESOL providers, resettlement workers, representatives of NGOs and organizations involved in the IRPP, community-based service providers, and volunteers. To protect the anonymity of the participants, each ESOL provider is identified as ESOL1, ESOL2 etc.; other support

providers are identified as SP1, SP2 etc; resettlement locations are labelled as Town A, Town B etc.

Data collection involved individual semi-structured interviews with the support providers, focusing on language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, the data was then qualitatively coded and analysed to identify key themes. Emerging issues in relation to intercultural support, the diversity of Syrian refugees, integration in the host communities, and perspectives on the resettlement process are presented below; issues relating to ESOL provision per se raised by these respondents are reported in Chapter 5.

Findings relating to language and intercultural support beyond ESOL provision

The resettlement of Syrian refugees in towns around Ireland started in 2015 and is ongoing at the time of writing (2018) as more local authorities participate in the resettlement programme. Officially, it covers the first year after refugees arrive in the host communities and involves responding to their needs, such as housing, healthcare, education, English language training, access to local services and employment, as well as community engagement. Given the focus of this study, the findings reported here reflect support providers' perspectives on language-related and intercultural aspects of this programme.

Intercultural support

Training for support providers

Many of the support providers felt there was a lack of intercultural training to prepare them for working with Syrian refugees; for instance, training that would enable them to understand the refugees' cultural background and the situations they had come from, and that would guide them as to possible responses to the challenges Syrians may encounter in Ireland. Resettlement workers commented that 'not one second' of training had been provided [SP9] and 'we went in blind' [SP10]. ESOL providers in Town A and a healthcare professional who treated Syrians in Town C similarly reported that they had not received any official training for working with refugees and migrants. In a recent resettlement, one ESOL provider mentioned a 'training morning' organized by the local inter-agency and a subsequent one-day session involving representatives from the DJE and other state agencies [ESOL4]. This support provider also arranged intercultural awareness training for staff in the local ETB.

However, it was generally agreed that more training was required. For example, one of the resettlement workers felt that, from personal experience of engaging with the health service

regarding the medical treatment of Syrian refugees, 'much more empathetic work' was necessary in medical training to prepare healthcare professionals for dealing with vulnerable patients from different language backgrounds [SP9]. Efforts to increase intercultural understanding among social protection officials and politicians were also recommended by NGO representatives, one of whom stressed how 'our politicians need a lot of training' and spoke of how a prominent political figure had inappropriately attributed social problems to the arrival of migrants [SP3].

At local level, volunteers play an important role in resettlement. One NGO involved in the IRPP did provide intercultural training to its volunteers. Its 'family advocacy' project included a training session covering topics such as Syrian life and culture, background to the Syrian conflict, refugees in Ireland, and communication issues. This was followed by monthly meetings at which volunteers could share concerns. The importance of such training was emphasized:

> SP6: Whilst people were very well intentioned […] there was a fear or a risk that they might ask inappropriate questions, you know, 'how did you get here?' 'what was your journey like?'

In Town A, Syrian refugees became involved in training Irish volunteers. One refugee family developed a presentation about life in Syria before the war and delivered this in schools, public venues, and as part of volunteer training in other towns.

Intercultural support for Syrian refugees

Intercultural support for Syrian refugees appeared to be limited. The orientation which Syrians received in the EROCs apparently covered 'the rights and the entitlements' of refugees and issues ranging from same-sex marriage to the weather in Ireland [SP2]. However, the effectiveness of inundating people with a 'huge amount of information' before they moved to host communities was questioned [SP6]. A Syrian volunteer felt this volume of information would be difficult to comprehend, even if interpretation was provided, as refugees experience a lot of 'worry' and 'stress' when they initially arrive [SP1].

Cultural challenges also arose around seeking information – it was observed that Syrian refugees tended to consult several people until they got a 'satisfactory answer' [SP8]. The Syrian volunteer explained that, because of language barriers or delays in getting answers from official sources, some turn to other Syrian refugees for advice and this may lead to misinformation. This volunteer highlighted the 'different structure of work in Syria' [SP1]

and Irish volunteers agreed that more could be done to develop refugees' awareness of 'how things work' [SP8] in Ireland:

> SP7: For those who are of working age, to understand the system. Back home, they're very enterprising people […] but EU regulations, the concept of these regulations, are foreign to them.

At local level, efforts were made to address potential causes of cultural misunderstanding. One resettlement worker organized regular information sessions for Syrian refugees, with contributions from relevant bodies such as representatives of Tusla, the Irish Child and Family Agency, who explained Irish practice in relation to child protection.

Arabic language support

More recent local resettlements of Syrian refugees have involved the recruitment of a 'translator and cross-cultural worker' with Arabic language skills. Support providers welcomed this:

> SP5: There definitely needs to be Arabic-speaking integration workers or intercultural workers available.

However, it was stressed that this new role required intercultural training:

> SP2: If you bring someone who speaks two languages yes that's good, they already have the language but then you need to train them.

In Town E, while a translator/cross-cultural worker had been appointed, no official training was provided. While some training was offered by NGOs this was not 'compulsory' [SP2]. Training refugees and other migrants to be involved in such resettlement work was recommended.

Wider challenges due to the lack of training and regulation of interpreters in Ireland were highlighted. Problems included quality of interpretation, limited availability of interpreters hired by state agencies, reliance on friends and acquaintances for interpreting, and lack of confidentiality and trust:

> SP2: It's hard really to tackle all these problems if we don't have a national strategy […] or a national regulation […] on who can or cannot work as an interpreter.

Written information in Arabic was also necessary. One support provider explained the efforts involved in getting a leaflet on local health services officially translated. Within the medical

context, it was mentioned that doctors are reluctant to use phone-interpreting services. A healthcare professional noted how Syrian refugees tended to rely on translation apps or family and friends for interpreting.

Bilingual assistance provided by a Syrian, Arabic-speaking teacher to support Syrian refugees learning English proved beneficial. The Syrian volunteer explained how this common linguistic and cultural background could help:

> SP1: I think the communication with Arabian teacher it will be better […] he know the jokes […] he know the whole stories, the same, you know, maybe he was in the same situation.

Shared experience could also generate trust through having the 'same language' and the 'same problems' [SP1]. One NGO representative also commented on the positive role played by their organization's Arabic-speaking volunteers [SP3]. Establishing trust was more challenging for Irish volunteers, particularly due to communication issues:

> SP7: You didn't feel you had their confidence […] we should have had some little bit of Arabic.

Responding to the needs of Syrian refugees

Profile of Syrian refugees

The support providers observed that Syrian refugees have diverse needs which may be influenced by age, gender, social background, and pre-arrival experience. The representative of one organization involved in the IRPP highlighted these 'very different profiles' pointing out that Ireland takes 'fairly vulnerable and difficult cases', including families with 'complex medical needs', and that:

> SP5: If you're 'fortunate' enough to be resettled, it's because you're unfortunate enough to have a very high level [...] of need.

This support provider also noted:

> SP5: There does seem to be an obvious class divide in terms of the access that people have had to education.

Education levels among Syrians admitted to Ireland varied – while some had third level education, others lacked basic literacy skills. Some young Syrian refugees were able to access higher education and employment due to their English language proficiency and educational experience. However, these cases appeared to be exceptions among the overall cohort of

Syrian refugees within which, according to one NGO representative, 'the majority probably are very vulnerable' [SP6].

Age emerged as a factor likely to influence integration. In Town A it was felt that, while younger people seemed to mix with people from Irish and other backgrounds, 'the adults probably socialize in their own group' and 'stick to their own' [SP8, ESOL 2]. The Syrian volunteer emphasized that refugees

> SP1: have different interests, like young people usually asking about education, but old people usually ask about job, about social, about rental house, about their right, about schools for their children, sometimes about shopping.

Trauma

The impact of trauma on refugees was noted by many of the support providers. One explained that admissions to Ireland include victims of torture:

> SP5: So mental health can be a significant issue […] and if people don't have a very high level of English, it can be hard for them to access what they need.

Support providers across the resettlement locations noted signs of trauma, such as memory lapses and lack of concentration. A healthcare professional observed:

> SP4: You can see stress in dental in teeth, it can be quite obvious […] some of them may be having a tough time.

Trauma was also felt to affect Syrian refugees' engagement with learning English:

> SP6: Like a lot of the families would've had trauma […] so, going to English language classes, really, for some of them, it wasn't a priority.

It was pointed out that trauma may become manifest after the initial phase of resettlement:

> SP10: After about six or nine months, I think it's when reality really kicks in for them but you kind of see that this is their life now and this is reality […] and 'okay I'm not going to go back to Syria and my family, I probably won't see them for however long' and that's where you can get a lot of depression and a bit of anxiety.

As the official resettlement supports are only intended for the first year after arrival, concerns were expressed about the long-term welfare of trauma survivors. Challenges in accessing counselling were compounded by language difference, unease at talking about deeply personal issues through an interpreter, and possible social stigma:

SP10: There is a taboo as well about accessing counselling and yeah, that's a problem, in Town A I remember, a guy said to me 'in Syria we tell our problems to the wall'.

This support provider recommended having 'more Arabic speaking therapists or counsellors' but acknowledged 'they're not that readily available' [SP10]. An NGO representative highlighted the lack of appropriate support across the resettlement locations:

SP6: One of the dominant issues is the lack of adequate supports and provision to deal with trauma [….] that the families have suffered and that is particularly so for the children […] and for the young adults […] the mainstream services are not equipped to deal with them.

Fear for separated family members could also affect refugees' wellbeing and integration. One NGO representative identified family reunification as the 'main issue' for Syrian refugees, pointing out that this 'is becoming more difficult' in Ireland under the International Protection Act (2015) and emphasizing the cultural importance of the extended family to Syrians:

SP2: They have a different notion for family anyway, for them it's siblings, it's mother, parents, grandparents, grandchildren etc., so when they arrived here they couldn't settle properly even after a year being in Ireland because they still needed their parents with them or siblings.

This view was shared by other support providers; one commented on how restrictions on reuniting with family members have had a negative impact on Syrian refugees:

SP6: That's left people very very angry […] and upset […] they feel that they've been *duped.*

This NGO representative felt that more could be done regarding 'family-linked resettlement' in order to address some of problems encountered by refugees trying to bring their relatives to Ireland.

Despite these challenges, the resilience of Syrian refugees and their ability to overcome obstacles was acknowledged; one volunteer commented on how the Syrians were able to act independently and felt the main barrier to their self-reliance related to their level of English language proficiency:

SP8: They are quite resilient and quite self- savvy, you know, they very quickly learned to do things themselves […] it's always […] back to languages where things do fall down if at all.

Gender

Most of the support providers felt Syrian women faced greater difficulties than men regarding integration (see Chapter 3 in this volume, on similar gender issues). They attributed this to women tending to stay at home and being less able to attend official English language classes due to childcare, transport, and dependency on their husbands' attendance:

> SP10: Women are a bit more vulnerable of course with younger kids, especially when they come to Town E and they're at home and they're not in the English classes.

Access to informal English language support was considered potentially useful for Syrian women as 'they don't get as much an opportunity to improve their English' [SP8]. However, one volunteer found cultural differences complicated, suggesting this option to a Syrian mother:

> SP8: I'm wondering now, actually, should I bring to her notice this [voluntary English conversation classes] programme and see if she could […] but I wonder would her husband want her going out to this.

A support provider involved in the resettlement programme on a national level acknowledged:

> SP5: There's issues in terms of intercultural differences in marriage with some people being married to quite young brides […] a big age disparity […] there's the obvious things about the role of women and different expectations in comparison to the culture here […] and elsewhere. Polygamy […] can arise in instances.

Regarding Syrian mothers, one family advocate noted 'these are young women, like they have their families very young' [SP8]. This volunteer also observed that Syrian teenage girls appeared not to participate in sport, in contrast to peers from Irish and other backgrounds.

Flexible responses seemed to be required to promote female engagement. One support provider organized a project in Town C aimed specifically at Syrian teenage girls and ran a women's group to engage Syrian women. Activities such as 'women's nights' in Town A and a mothers' group in Town B were also found useful:

> SP6: Some women went and just met the […] mums, once or twice a week for a cup of coffee […] and a chat. And that was successful in doing two things, it helped people feel included in part of the community […] and it helped the kind of language acquisition […] in an informal way, it wasn't done in a very formal classroom setting.

Different perceptions of Syrian women emerged from the interviews. Dress was regarded as 'noticeable' [SP7] and seemed a source of concern for some support providers:

> SP8: The older girls like they're dressed in their veils […] they're dressed in, you know, maybe long type of things […] they're like mini women.

One volunteer wondered if the visible difference of the Syrian women was 'making a statement' [SP7] that could impact on their acceptance within the local community, while an ESOL provider commented:

> ESOL3: I think even for Irish people, even for teachers in the centre it's kind of, I don't mean, it's kind of like a trauma for them seeing people you know with the hijab.

It appeared that seeing the wearing of Islamic dress as 'normal' was a new concept for some Irish people. For instance at a welcome event:

> SP10: They got talking and like that's it, they're normal, all of a sudden, you know, you don't even see the hijab now, first it's the person.

Syrian volunteers also encountered preconceptions regarding the role of women in Syria. One female refugee who participated in a talk to Irish volunteers in Town E was anxious to dispel myths about her position as a Syrian woman:

> SP10: She focused on like the hijab and wearing it and how she felt and she's a wife and a mother and she's volunteering, whatever else she's doing.

Irish perceptions of Syrian women thus revealed issues in relation to normalizing diversity and respecting refugees' cultural identities.

Resettlement in host communities

Intercultural activities

The resettlement programme in each host community required the organization of intercultural activities and events. These encounters were regarded as positive, but it was felt they involved a 'fairly superficial kind of engagement' and language differences impacted on the interaction they generated [SP5].

Organizations within the host community were also involved in intercultural events. Local Christian and Islamic leaders engaged with Syrian refugees through interfaith celebrations, for example, at Eid and Christmas. Sports clubs and other groups, such as the Girl Guides, were active in welcoming refugees. The role of youthwork was emphasized by one support

provider who organized a storytelling and photography project with young Syrians in Town C which led to a public exhibition and the production of an educational resource.

Syrians' engagement in activities organized by NGOs, resettlement workers and local groups varied. In Town E, support providers reported positive experiences with the men's and women's shed network – community-based associations which promote social interaction, health and wellbeing – but in Town A 'Syrians haven't got overly involved in the men's shed' [SP3].

Initiatives were also taken by Syrian refugees themselves. A horticultural project was developed by Syrians in Town A with local support. Suggestions were made as to how Irish people could help with these ideas:

> SP7: Maybe some kind of small cooperative […] and maybe somebody locally invested with them or something like that […] and, let them do their work and be a mentor. […] that it would be *real*. I think everything should be *real* […] nothing should be done on a token basis.

Local response to Syrian refugees

The support providers found that Syrian refugees were well received in the host communities. Feedback received from Syrians indicated that they felt welcome in these locations, for example, in Town A 'they say, well they love it and people are very friendly' [ESOL2].

However, several support providers mentioned the lack of official information provided to local communities prior to the refugees' arrival:

> SP6: The OPMI are a very secret - were very secretive […] about the plans, and when they were coming, nobody was allowed to speak to them, they weren't allowed to talk to anybody […] sometimes they came in under the cover of darkness.

One NGO representative felt this stemmed from a fear of 'negative publicity locally' [SP3]. However, withholding information could impact on local perceptions as rumours spread, for instance, inflating the number of Syrian families due to arrive.

Some support providers were aware of negative comments and racist remarks regarding Syrian refugees, particularly on social media:

> ESOL2: I'm horrified to be honest with the racism that's here in Ireland […] and again you know yourself from social media and the way - the Islamophobia is dreadful.

Awareness-raising about refugees and migrants was undertaken by one NGO through a myth-busting project, and the need to challenge stereotypes was stressed:

> SP3: I think there's this issue about the Muslims, like people are afraid of Muslims […] but I think it's really important to break down these perceptions of Muslim people, and you know they're terrorists and stuff.

The problem of Syrian refugees arriving at a time when local communities were still experiencing economic hardship was acknowledged. One volunteer commented that Syrians might be 'seen as privileged' as they appear to get considerable support, especially with housing, which could trigger 'resentment' in the community [SP7].

Location of host communities

Under the IRPP, towns outside Dublin are chosen for resettlement. Relatively small numbers of families – 'on average ten'– are resettled in any given location [SP10]. The support providers generally approved of this dispersal and the fact that Syrian families are 'scattered' within these towns 'so they're not all in a ghetto in one area' [SP3, SP4].

However, distance from services, including essential medical services, and limited public transport emerged as challenges. Syrian refugees also faced problems with driving, from acquiring an Irish licence to the price of cars and insurance.

Longer-term integration

Beyond the first year

Some efforts were made towards 'sustainable' integration beyond the one-year official programme, such as the continuation of the family advocacy project in Town A [SP3]. Before the end of their role in a given location, resettlement workers developed 'exit strategies' based on the needs and aspirations of Syrian refugees there [SP3, SP10].

However, longer-term social inclusion was identified as a challenge. While it was felt that the younger generation of Syrian refugees would participate in Irish society, expectations for the integration of parents and older adults appeared to be lower:

> SP4: The next generation of Syrians will do really really well […] but I don't see employment for their parents.

Some support providers expressed concerns as to how Syrian refugees would fare after the initial year of support:

> ESOL1: We throw loads of money at them for a year, and then at the end it's off you go there on your own, and they're left kind of adrift, and it's very easy I think to sink into that cycle of

social welfare and not working and, it's very very bad and, yeah I don't think it's a good model at all.

The role of language as an important factor in the integration process was emphasized:

ESOL1: I think language is the key, integration, you can't really integrate if you don't speak the language.

However, some of the ESOL providers felt the official priority placed on learning English was not always appropriate and that integration should be viewed more holistically, considering each refugee's own aspirations, rather than forcing Syrians to meet Irish expectations:

ESOL 3: Integration is great I'm all for it, except if you're saying and it smacks a little bit of 'you do it our way or -' 'assimilate into us or forget about it'.

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that establishing trust and building lasting friendships takes considerable time and cannot be forced.

Employment

Access to employment was regarded as vital to the integration of Syrian refugees. However, support providers felt there were limited job opportunities in the resettlement locations. Lack of proficiency in English was viewed as a further barrier to employment.

SP7: I see challenges when they go to work […] anybody with a foreign language is at a disadvantage.

The Syrian volunteer identified 'English and skills' as major problems, stressing that refugees require support to develop their skillset for work in Ireland [SP1]. The need for qualifications was highlighted, but recognition of previous experience and professional qualifications proved difficult. Distance from work was another challenge for Syrian refugees who often faced transport problems.

Support with seeking work was also considered important. NGO representatives mentioned their organizations' work-preparation courses and efforts to encourage employers to hire refugees. However, one support provider felt the current 'rigid model' of 'going to a job club for two weeks, coming out with your CV and making phone calls' was of little use to Syrian refugees, and recommended mentoring as an alternative [SP9]. The importance of building local connections was emphasized:

SP9: How you get jobs in Ireland is your social network.

There was concern about dependency on social welfare, particularly for young people, and the impact this could have on local perceptions of Syrian refugees:

SP8: The worst thing that could happen to these young people is that they could go from school, to jobseekers' allowance […] it would just lead to all kinds of things in the community, I think, as well […] community acceptance.

The Syrian volunteer illustrated the dilemma faced by families, especially those with several children, stressing that refugees need guidance regarding work and welfare:

SP1: Sitting at home that's very difficult […] and actually that's more stressful than what happened even in Syria […] one man, he said 'I looking for work, but I find out that if I work, I will get half of my social welfare and I will make a big problem to deal with my expenses'.

Education

Education emerged as another issue with long-term implications for integration. Concerns were expressed regarding Syrian children at secondary school. Problems included ensuring that older teenagers, whose education may have been interrupted due to displacement, got places in schools and finding places appropriate to the needs of young Syrians.

Challenges also related to English language learning and engagement with subjects across the post-primary curriculum. School support for Syrian students appeared limited, although local volunteers offered some extra-curricular support. The need for guidance with subject choices, career options, and accessing third level education was highlighted.

Parental communication with schools was identified as a further challenge; language was a barrier and getting an interpreter for meetings with school staff was not always possible. Even when an interpreter was available, understanding the Irish educational system and the culture of the school proved difficult. Written correspondence was another issue – Syrian families needed support to understand information and write letters to schools. It was felt that a mediator should be available to support parental engagement with the Irish education system and that more respect for Syrian parents' values, including their religious beliefs, is necessary:

SP9: There's a kind of a cultural chasm even around like, still, what is Eid […] or why do I not want my children, you know, in religion class, you know, the values that people associate with.

Obstacles for Syrian students who wanted to enter higher education also arose. Officially, Syrian refugees must be three years resident in Ireland before they are entitled to the same financial supports as Irish students. Other barriers included English language proficiency requirements and lack of information about courses and application criteria.

Perspectives on the resettlement programme

Policy and evaluation

The lack of a national strategy on resettlement or any model of integration which could be adapted to the needs of Syrian refugees in the host communities was raised by many support providers. The delivery of resettlement on a local level was described as 'ad hoc' [SP2, SP5] and the need for clear policy was emphasized:

> SP5: There should be a national strong policy underpinning, which makes everyone's role very clear […] if you had a network of integration service, support workers, whatever […] *nationally* […] appropriately resourced.

Support providers criticized the lack of official evaluation of the resettlement programme, and the fact that formal evaluation was 'resisted' by OPMI [SP3]:

> SP9: The Department [of Justice and Equality] do not allow […] evaluations of resettlement projects, so you cannot share the learning […]; lack of transparency, consistently has been the mode of operating of the Department.

Contact among resettlement workers enabled some exchange of learning and one NGO conducted an internal evaluation of its resettlement work. Nevertheless, it was stressed that 'external evaluation is critical' [SP3].

The role of the DJE as the Irish government department responsible for resettlement was questioned, and its approach gave some cause for concern. One support provider described how an OPMI official dismissed the need for improvements in medical interpreting services:

> SP9: She said in a meeting 'sure can't they just point to what's wrong with them?' […] like she's in OPMI, she's a manager […] how do you even respond to that?

Other government departments and state agencies, such as the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Social Protection, and the Health Service Executive, were also felt to lack understanding in their response to refugees. Support providers considered the official

approach to resettlement 'top-heavy' [SP6] and recommended greater focus on community engagement, 'more transparency' and 'more public involvement' [SP3].

Initiatives had been taken by one NGO to develop resettlement resources. It had 'created templates that are now publicly available' [SP3] based on its work in Town A:

> SP10: We'd developed the resettlement and a capacity building map we called it […] this was the short, medium and long-term goals of the project and it looked at, I think, twelve integration indicators.

Finally, some support providers mentioned that 'programme refugees', such as Syrians arriving under the IRPP, receive more support than other migrants, particularly asylum seekers. Approaches to integration which offer support to all migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, and their host communities were proposed as possible alternatives. A recently-formed county integration network 'which involves all communities' was recommended as good practice by support providers in Town A [SP3].

Summary of findings

The perspectives of the support providers interviewed in this study highlighted a range of issues facing Syrian refugees and host communities which should be considered in resettlement:

- Intercultural training for professionals and volunteers working with refugees
- Intercultural support for refugees in the host communities
- Training and regulation of interpreters
- Recognition of the diverse needs of refugees
- Access to appropriate support for survivors of trauma
- Gender-sensitive supports which respect refugees' cultural identities
- Promotion of intercultural understanding at national and local level
- Access to transport, services and opportunities in resettlement locations
- Access to employment, addressing challenges e.g. English language skills for work, recognition of experience and qualifications, further training needs
- Appropriate school places for children and teenagers, support with English language and curriculum learning, and greater intercultural awareness in education
- Support for refugees' access to higher education
- Official evaluation of the IRPP and development of a national strategy on refugee

resettlement.

Discussion

The scope of this study was limited, and its findings, based on the perspectives of fourteen support providers, serve merely as insights into the resettlement of Syrian refugees in Ireland. However, from the themes which emerged in relation to language and intercultural issues, some conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the findings of this study indicate the need for intercultural training for professionals and volunteers involved in the resettlement programme. While the recruitment of Arabic-speakers for resettlement work is encouraging, intercultural training should be provided for those appointed. Greater intercultural support for Syrian refugees when they arrive in the host communities is also required.

Secondly, the individual needs and aspirations of Syrian refugees should be considered, as should factors that may affect their integration such as age, gender, and previous experience. Opportunities for informal English language learning and intercultural interaction beyond the official ESOL classes should be explored, particularly for women. Appropriate support for survivors of trauma is urgently required, while access to family reunification could relieve fears for separated relatives and reduce the stress associated with resettlement.

Thirdly, while reactions to Syrian refugees in the host communities were perceived as positive, long-term integration remains a challenge. Access to employment is a key issue, with possible supports including: more vocationally-oriented English language support, guidance regarding Irish business culture, local mentoring, opportunities for further training, and recognition of previously acquired qualifications and experience. Education is also a major concern; the findings of this study indicate the need for English language and subject-specific support in secondary schools, greater support for Syrian parents and, at institutional and policy level, supports to enable Syrian students access higher education.

Finally, there is a need for clear policy on refugee resettlement in Ireland, based on national and international best practice. An official evaluation of the current programme is required, while a reconsideration of the roles of government departments and a more community-based approach to resettlement is recommended. From these findings in relation to language and intercultural support for Syrian refugees, it is hoped this study may inform approaches to integration which promote the inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants in Ireland.

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