

**LGBTQ+ Newcomer Resettlement –  
Insights of a Frontline Worker and Student of Social Work**

**By**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the challenges LGBTQ+ newcomers face during their resettlement, questioning the underlying intentions of Canada's global reputation and national identity as a leader of LGBTQ+ refugee rights. It argues that in this Canadian 'safe haven', LGBTQ+ newcomers are re-victimized, contributing to challenging social determinants of health. This re-victimization is contextualized within the neoliberal political and economic policies of the Canadian settler-colonial state. The writer utilizes an autoethnographic approach reflexive of his lived experiences of trauma and displacement as a gay migrant working on the frontline for over a decade, and the insights gained from his recent formal education in social work. The paper highlights the importance of a deep awareness of pre-migration, migration and post-migration phases and their contexts when working with LGBTQ+ newcomers. Better practices for working with LGBTQ+ newcomers are suggested, while stressing the need to connect newcomers and queer struggles with Indigenous movements for justice.

## **LGBTQ+ Newcomer Resettlement – Insights of a Frontline Worker and Student of Social Work**

*In the end, all that we desire comes down to three things: money, power and sex.*

*Welcome to Las Vegas!* This mocking advertisement of sordid consumerism welcomed me as I was struggling through Toronto in a packed train soon after arriving in Canada in 2004. It sparked in me flashbacks of my life in Sri Lanka, and of two years' exile in Hong Kong – the first city that I fled to from Sri Lanka. My excuse in going there was to pursue a graduate degree, in order to avoid the pressures of an arranged marriage. As a gay man, I bore indelible emotional scars due to physical violence, police harassment, public humiliation, and rejection by my parents and relations. My onward journey was painfully convoluted because of my fear of being outed; I resorted to 'economic class migration' and waited for over four years to arrive in Canada.

Growing up in the in the 'post-colonial' Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, I witnessed the demise of its welfare state model and its subsequent engulfing in neoliberalism that contributed to massive corruption, civil war, death and destruction. Although, in my two years there, Hong Kong became a safer hideout, I was exposed to the mechanisms of a ruthless industrial complex created by extreme forms of market capitalism. In the 1990s, Hong Kong had the world's highest population density, and the world's highest per capita environmental footprint (Fulford, 1996; Barron & Steinbrecher, 1999). Its air pollution made me sick, and as a 'brown-skinned' gay man I felt highly isolated, even within Hong Kong's gay scene.

In Canada, while my sexuality became legally sanctioned for the first time in my life, I was confronted with racism as an omnipresent glass ceiling, including in Toronto's gay village and queer activist circles. I was ridiculed for my 'unpronounceable' name, my attempts to connect with my own Sri Lankan community became futile as I was questioned and laughed at for being an 'eligible' bachelor. Canada presented me with a highly unequal and consumerist society where 'third world' human body parts were being sold under the pretext of medical tourism (Chung, 2008). In 2007, five million Canadians were living in poverty, more than one

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million of them children. Almost 70,000 people in Toronto were on waiting lists for affordable housing; 750,000 Canadians relied on food banks (Olive, 2007). I was confused by the revelation of how Canada treated Indigenous Peoples, as all I had heard about Canada was its acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and its multicultural rhetoric. Having lived as a misfit holding on to ideals of social justice, and as a closeted gay man, I was aghast at the welcome note to Las Vegas, wrapped in the unholy trinity of money, power and sex. I came out to everybody, clinging to the hope of what my new home would bring me – the promise of freedom.

The more I read about queer liberation struggles in North America and learned about trans and queer youth suicide rates, numerous queer bashings in Toronto, and the homophobia that is ingrained in Canadian society, the more I questioned my assumed sense of safety. Finding myself jammed at the intersection of homophobia and racism in a ‘multi-cultural’, classist society further configured the extent of my safety. The toughest hit to bear, an extremely disturbing homophobic incident, happened in the most unexpected place – an institution of higher education – ending my academic plans and impacting my mental health. Ensuing years of navigating the heteronormative Canadian healthcare system only exposed me to further violence. My symbolic death in the Canadian ‘safe haven’ drove me towards a rebirth with a renewed vigour. A formal education in mental health counselling, and years of volunteering and queer activism landed me a job at a community health centre, working with LGBTQ+ newcomers. This work helped me to contextualize transphobia and homophobia around the world, and LGBTQ+ forced migration. Just like me, all my clients had arrived in Canada with the fervent hope of safety and freedom.

My frontline work provided me with deep insights into the sheer intensity of violence and trauma LGBTQ+ newcomers had suffered, and the complexity of the challenges they faced after arriving in Canada. I also got involved in numerous grassroots organizing, and mobilizing LGBTQ+ newcomers to march in Toronto Pride parades. My lived experiences helped me to be

more person-centred, empathetic and reflexive. I became intensely aware of the (unearned) privileges I gained during my transition from being a service user to a service provider.

It is in this context that critiquing the LGBTQ+ newcomer resettlement process as a frontline worker studying social work is important to me, for several reasons. First and foremost, the Canadian immigration process is lengthy and is heavily influenced by numerous political discourses – social democratic, neo-conservative and third way or liberal. They are inextricably linked to the local and global neoliberal market, which constantly disrupts and displaces the labour of marginalized populations for capitalist accumulation. Strikingly, these discourses feed into the ideologies of key federal political parties and hence public consciousness. Secondly, the dominant discourse on LGBTQ+ newcomer resettlement is much contested within Canadian immigration policies and is woven into the mainstream narratives of Canadian identity (Lenon & Dryden, 2015; Murray, 2016; Kinsman, 2018). This is particularly noteworthy, given Canada's reputation as a safe haven for refugees and as a global leader in LGBTQ+ rights. For instance, Canada was the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, and in 1991 Canada became the first Western nation to accept refugees based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Travers, et al., 2010; LaViolette, 2009). Thirdly, and paradoxically, community agencies that support LGBTQ+ newcomers are "...chronically underfunded or do not receive consistent funding and operate above staff and resource capacity" (Ali-Akow & Bucik, 2017, 5). Finally, LGBTQ+ newcomers' extremely traumatic pre-migration experiences, and the life-crushing hurdles they face after arrival in Canada make their resettlement process urgent and complex.

Exploring the challenges LGBTQ+ newcomers face during their resettlement, this paper argues that in this Canadian 'safe haven', LGBTQ+ newcomers are re-victimized, contributing to challenging social determinants of health. This re-victimization is contextualized within the neoliberal political and economic policies of the Canadian settler-colonial state. I utilize an

autoethnographic approach in order to be reflexive of my lived experiences of trauma and displacement as a gay migrant working on the frontline for over a decade, and the insights gained from my recent formal education in social work. This paper stresses the importance of a deep awareness of pre-migration, migration and post-migration phases and their contexts when working with LGBTQ+ newcomers. These processes and their contexts are invariably interconnected and intermixed, leaving LGBTQ+ newcomers with compounding and long-lasting trauma (Hopkinson et al., 2017). Better practices for working with LGBTQ+ newcomers are suggested towards the end of the paper, while stressing the need to connect newcomers and queer struggles with Indigenous movements for justice.

### **Global Contexts of LGBTQ+ Persecution**

Global debates over sexual orientation and gender identities are increasingly framed as issues of human rights and social progress, particularly in many Commonwealth states (Lennox & Waites, 2013). This is important because the criminalization of same-sex behaviour spread on a global scale within the British Empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Human Rights Watch in 2018, 36 out of 53 (68%) of the Commonwealth countries criminalize homosexuality. In comparison, 68 (35%) of the United Nations member states criminalize consensual same-sex acts (Mendos, 2019). Added to the effects of British colonialism in criminalizing homosexuality is the massive resistance to LGBTQ+ rights in these former colonial states, which now portray such moves as Western indoctrination and the introduction of a ‘Western disease’. Mendos (2019) also highlights that the death penalty for same-sex acts is on the statute book in six states: Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen and the northern regions of Nigeria. The death penalty is possible in five more countries: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and the southern regions of Nigeria, while Uganda is attempting to reintroduce the death penalty for LGBTQ+ individuals. Most major religious ideologies oppose progress in LGBTQ+ rights.

Another irony is that the Christian evangelical organizations in the Global North are mercilessly against any advances of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in the Global South (Staples, 2019; Nicol, 2018). Mule & Gates-Gasse (2012) and Kalende (2014) warn of the ultra-right Western-based Christian evangelical movements for their well-orchestrated religious conversions and persistent proliferation of systemic homophobic violence in Africa and around the globe. Award-winning documentaries, *God Loves Uganda* (2013) and *Call Me Kuchu* (2012) provide shocking insights into the machinations of U.S. Christian evangelicals in Uganda.

It is clear that cis-heteropatriarchal stigma leading to extreme forms of violence against transgender people and homosexuality, intensified and fostered by colonial-era criminal laws, religious views and neocolonial forces, are key reasons behind the flow of LGBTQ+ newcomers into Canada and other countries. At the same time, structural violence against LGBTQ+ people exists in countries where laws on same-sex relationships are not clear, e.g. in Russia and China, and indeed in countries, including Canada, where same-sex relationships are legalized. Thoreson (2014) sheds light on this situation by employing a political-economy approach that situates anti-queer animus in a national and transnational context. Largely as a ‘post-colonial’ legacy, nation states have an almost exclusive ability to regulate homosexuality through legislation and state interventions, which in turn are fostered by transnational capital and religious fundamentalisms.

I have witnessed the impacts of such activities through my clients’ accounts of a) having to abandon their livelihoods and relocate multiple times, and b) undergoing so-called ‘conversion therapies’ leading to ‘corrective gang rape’, female genital mutilation and disowning by their families. Often females were blamed for giving birth to LGBTQ+ children. After arriving in Canada, LGBTQ+ newcomers are then exploited in the Canadian job market; this is discussed later in the essay. My lived experiences in Sri Lanka included being discarded as a ‘waste of life’, even in my workplaces. As a bachelor who was passing the culturally accepted age of marriage

(and procreation), I was even considered to be ‘sterile’, hence ‘inauspicious’. Thus, my younger brother, who was an ‘accomplished family man’, automatically took the lead in religious functions and rites, including at my parents’ funerals, which otherwise would have been my responsibility as the older son of the family. The decision processes leading to such actions were often subtle, yet swift. The most disconcerting aspect of all this was that it was the Buddhist prelates who performed such ceremonies who publicly ridiculed me for not getting married.

### **Intersectionality as a Starting Point for Practice...**

‘Being new’ is a key social category when outlining an intersectional perspective to work with refugees and immigrants (Yan & Anucha, 2017). Concurrently, gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, race, skin colour, socio-economic status, physical ability, English or French language ability, language accent and so on become potentially unfavourable factors. In relation to LGBTQ+ newcomers, gender identities and mental health status are additional unique social determinants of health because of past and recurrent trauma (Kahn & Alessi, 2017). Such barriers for LGBTQ+ newcomers are not merely intersecting, but *interlocking*. They stem from systemic injustices and thus cannot be overcome individually.

In my frontline work I have witnessed how multiple barriers, such as poverty, racism, lack of access to healthcare, being new and LGBTQ+ identified, coupled with past trauma create interlocking barriers. For example, some of my clients were unable to go to different agencies for support, because they did not have the fare for public transport. For those who were breadwinners in their home countries, not being able to send back any money for their loved ones made them extremely distressed. The stigma surrounding LGBTQ+ newcomers, who are often portrayed as wasteful consumers of tax dollars, characterized their new realities. The consciousness about racism, often a new concept for racialized newcomers, added insult to injury, when such racist attacks happened at presumed ‘safe spaces’, for example, at Toronto’s gay village. I frequently

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faced racial microaggressions at queer activist spaces. Some of those experiences were subtle and some were blatant. Such violence made me numb with pain and I felt further isolated. Knowing my clients' and my lived experiences of such social realities helped me understand the complexities of such barriers and their collective impacts on the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ newcomers. They have also helped me join collective fronts for advocacy.

### **Key Demographics**

Canada's immigration policy of recognizing LGBTQ+ as a distinct category seeking asylum, its reputation as a safe haven for LGBTQ+ refugees, the legality of homosexuality and its pathway for claiming asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) have attracted 2,371 (13%) of the total of 18,221 refugee claims to Canada between 2013 and 2015. It is particularly noteworthy that 1,461 (62%) of SOGIE claimants during this period originated in African and Caribbean countries (Rehaag, 2017). It is also significant that from 2013 to 2016, refugee claimants increased from 10,370 to 23,900, with a growing share likely being SOGIE claimants (Bahliby, 2017). Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (2019) announced a new Rainbow Refugee Assistance Partnership to encourage private citizens' involvement in sponsoring LGBTQ+ refugees. The Rainbow Refugee Society based in Vancouver and the Rainbow Railroad based in Toronto, with the help of private sponsorships, have assisted in sponsoring, respectively, 67 and 198 LGBTQ+ refugees. These data and the trends in the arrivals of LGBTQ+ refugees show the increasing need for the provision of services.

### **Impact of the Steep Ladder of Immigration Status on LGBTQ+ Newcomers**

'LGBTQ+ newcomers' is the umbrella term used to include asylum seekers, non-status people, refugee claimants, convention refugees and new immigrants. The Appendix shows that each of these categories denotes an immigration status that corresponds to differing access to resettlement services. This is particularly the case in access to healthcare, which is a key requisite



of resettlement. Yet, asylum seekers who make inland claims are not eligible for primary healthcare until they submit their refugee claims to Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and receive the eligibility notice for interim federal health coverage (IFH). This process may take three months, or longer, depending on the circumstances of the case. From my frontline work I know that a very high percentage of LGBTQ+ newcomers make inland claims, because of a) the fear that they may be sent back if they claim asylum at the port of entry, b) being scared to come out to strange and ‘unfriendly’ immigration officers, and c) not knowing at all that they can claim asylum based on SOGIE.

### **Pre-migration Stressors for LGBTQ+ Newcomers**

Mikkonen and Raphael (2010) stress that unjust social systems and marginalized social locations act as crucial social determinants that influence people’s health outcomes. Resettlement is particularly a health issue for LGBTQ+ newcomers because of the severe psychological and physical abuses they have already faced (Khan & Alessi, 2017). Such social determinants of health (SDOH) are prolonged, tedious and yet critical. Firstly, they emerge as pre-migration stressors, which include torture, ‘corrective’ gang rape, ‘cleansing rituals’, disowning by the family, public humiliation, the death of partners, partners missing due to forced displacement, disenfranchised grief, forced heterosexual marriage and forced conversion therapy. Some of these torturous measures are particularly aimed at lesbians, bisexual women and trans people because of heteropatriarchal social systems fostered by religious and cultural ideologies (Nudel & Kulatilake, 2019). A lack of role models in forming healthy same-sex relationships, shame, guilt, confusion, self-hate, self-denial, suicidal attempts and suicidal ideation characterize their pre-immigration mental health conditions. Therefore, a thorough understanding of how LGBTQ+ people live under such conditions before they flee for safety is essential when working with them.

## **The Migration Phase**

I remember my tears of joy after I was welcomed as a permanent resident into Canada at Toronto airport. I felt that for the first time in my life, I had become a recognized, not a discarded, human being. I would not have to run away any more for being gay. I decided to take off forever the mask I had been wearing all my life. I was fed up of that ‘cat and mouse’ game.

Contextualizing my lived experiences, I realize that fleeing to Canada for safety does give LGBTQ+ newcomers some respite as they are then not in direct danger of being tortured or killed. However, new challenges await them on arrival. These include language barriers, racism, culture shock, social isolation, abject poverty, transphobia, homophobia, food insecurity, along with a lack of safe housing, employment and healthcare, and the navigation of intricate systems, and the long and tedious refugee claim process (Mule & Gates-Gasse, 2012).

Many LGBTQ+ newcomers were breadwinners in their home countries. Some have had to leave young children and some have lost their partners due to violence. Hence, they are not only grieving but also pressurized to send money back home for the sustenance of their loved ones. Yet they cannot work until they submit their refugee claims, which can take three or more months. Then they must apply for a work permit. This process takes another several weeks. These early months of their stay, often in very unsafe shelters under extremely precarious conditions, with no money in hand, make them feel lost, all the while being pressed to complete the refugee claim documentation. The Canadian climate, especially the winter, is another huge challenge as they often do not have any winter clothes. Many had good jobs and come with professional backgrounds and expertise, but after landing they become next to nobody, being confronted with unending challenges during the early migration phase. I have helplessly witnessed the sheer frustration of so many LGBTQ+ newcomers who are not able to work for many months, as a result sinking into abject poverty and developing mental health issues.

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I was shocked and scared when I learned from Janoff (2005) and Warner (2002) of the degree of historic anti-2SLGBTQ+ violence and ongoing presence of systemic anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiments in Canada. Kia and O’Neill (2017) discuss how such violence is perpetuated by the construct of heterosexism and straightness. They emphasize the severity of such oppression on LGBTQ+ newcomers “...whose experiences may more directly reflect the lack of legal recognition and protection” (p. 311). This why understanding the multiple interlocking forms of oppression is central to working with LGBTQ+ newcomers.

### **Migration and Post-migration Phases – A Critique**

The 1951 UN convention on refugees defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 1951, p. 14). LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are categorized under “membership of a particular social group” in this unspecified and loosely termed definition.

A refugee is therefore someone who flees to safety due to a well-founded fear, who is deemed ‘powerless’, and in dire need of help. Their new locality of assumed safety, the mechanisms in place and those who receive them are perceived as ‘generous’, ‘kind’ and ‘charitable’. These actors also wield the power to decide who qualifies to be ‘in’. However, hidden under Canada’s ‘safe haven’ trademark, characterised by its political, ideological and spatial domains, is its inherent paradox: the inconceivable hurdles and barriers that LGBTQ+ newcomers face from the day of their arrival.

Thobani (2000) explains that racism and sexism in Canadian immigration policy are interconnected, and are necessary ingredients of Canada’s nation building project, which keeps whiteness at its core. The fact is that, other than Indigenous Peoples, and the descendants of Black people who were enslaved and forcefully brought into North America by the slave trade,

all others are settlers. However, white European colonizers adopt the grand national identity of Canadian nation builders, while keeping racialized newcomer-settlers at the mercy of their ‘charitable’ projects. What is hidden are the motives of this charitable exercise, which is to squeeze the newcomer-settlers’ labour for the nation building project. Utilizing a post-colonial framework, Fobear (2014) questions the legitimacy of Canada’s ‘safe haven’ claims for SOGIE refugees that at the same time mask the historic and ongoing violence against Indigenous and racialized communities through “different but interconnected structures of settler-colonial discourse and regulation” (p. 48). Thus, I would argue that the ‘safe haven’ branding, while erasing Canada’s systemic violence, is utilized to lure the globally displaced for the highly exploitative Canadian market.

Murray (2016) and Lenon & Dryden (2015) highlight the ways in which the SOGIE refugee determination process concretizes the dominant discourses of citizenship, national identity, patriarchy and hetero-normativity, in that it filters SOGIE claimants before granting asylum to the queer ‘other’. I call this process the ‘re-queering’ of those who are already queer, in order to assimilate them easily into the Canadian neoliberal, nation-state narrative. Puar (2013) coins the term homonationalism to explain this simultaneous absorption of LGBTQ+ subjects into nation building projects while essential welfare provisions and immigrant rights are cut, and the state’s power to engage in surveillance, detention and deportation is intensified.

Canadian immigration processes are characterised by increasing complexity, uncertainty and lack of transparency (George, 2017). Canadian immigration policies have shown a growing labour market orientation that is about aligning vulnerable immigrants and refugees for often unchecked exploitation in the competitive neoliberal market. This brings to our attention a) the remarkable inseparability between migration stressors and the Canadian neoliberal political enterprise that dictates its immigration policy, b) the intensity of systemic challenges and hence

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inherent limitations for LGBTQ+ newcomers to engage in democratic decision making processes, and c) the challenges for frontline workers in the social service sector to work within a shrinking and corporatized public domain, while negotiating with a state that professes to be the protector, but actually prioritizes the market over LGBTQ+ newcomer and refugee welfare.

**Workings of Dominant Discourses on LGBTQ+ Newcomer Resettlement**

The table below based on Finkel (2006), MacGregor (1999) and Braedley (2006) sums up the key Canadian political discourses that guide social policy. It is notable that all these discourses are closely tied to and influenced by the neoliberal capitalist market.

<b>Key Discourses guiding Social Policy</b>	<b>Resultant LGBTQ+ Refugee Policy Directions</b>
Social Democratic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pro-LGBTQ+ rights and supportive of LGBTQ+ immigration</li> <li>• Seeks the welfare state model – regulates the market to enhance social services</li> <li>• Supportive of LGBTQ+ refugee welfare: healthcare, access to basic services</li> <li>• Still, operates within neo-liberal, nation-state discourse</li> <li>• Promotes equity, though the approach is increasingly sporadic</li> </ul>
Neo-conservative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsupportive of LGBTQ+ in general and unsupportive of LGBTQ+ immigration</li> <li>• Influenced by movements of religious rights that promote straight family values</li> <li>• Legalizes such discourses through legislature: e.g. Bill-C-31 Protecting Canada’s Immigration System Act               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Filtering: e.g. Designated Countries of Origin</li> <li>○ Expedited refugee deportations – restrictions to appeal, excessive power to the Minister of Immigration</li> <li>○ Drastically shortened refugee claim timelines: e.g. 15 days for port-of-entry claimants, 30-60 days for hearings</li> <li>○ ‘Inadmissibility’ clause: refugee, Permanent Resident status can be withheld</li> <li>○ Resulted in ‘legacy case’ claimants, who had to wait over 5 years to get a refugee claim hearing date</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curbs refugee migration by surveillance, detention and deportation</li> <li>• Policy changes to Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) to cut healthcare provisions for LGBTQ+ refugees (this was challenged in court and was defeated)</li> <li>• Portrays refugees as ‘illegal’, ‘jumping the line’ and a ‘burden to tax payers’</li> <li>• Strong white nationalist sentiments, e.g. ‘Old stock’ Canadians vs. the rest including racialized, immigrant, LGBTQ+ refugee communities</li> <li>• Minimize state intervention, deregulate the market to favour capital over labour</li> <li>• Promotes meritocracy (not equity)</li> <li>• Gives rise to right-wing anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ+ populism</li> </ul>
Third Way (Liberal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom is portrayed as an individual right and achievement</li> <li>• Promotes multiculturalism but no political power devolved to the marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ refugees</li> <li>• Proclaims to be pro-LGBTQ+ refugee while funding cuts to services and restrictions continue (e.g. Bill C-31 is in force, with minor amendments)</li> <li>• Prolonged refugee claim process: wait time for hearing extended up to 18 months – mainly due to inadequate funding for Immigration and Refugee Board</li> <li>• Refugees crossing border are framed as ‘irregular’ border-crossers</li> <li>• State responsibilities of LGBTQ+ refugee protection is outsourced to private sponsorship packages</li> <li>• Promotes individualized, charity-based good citizenship sentiments</li> <li>• Operates within neoliberal paradigm, hence surveillance, detention, deportation and normalization continue</li> <li>• Talks equity but promotes meritocracy</li> <li>• LGBTQ+ newcomers are prone to exploitation by unchecked market conditions</li> </ul>

### LGBTQ+ Newcomer Services in Toronto’s Social Work Agency Settings

This segment is also informed by my frontline experiences of working with LGBTQ+ newcomers at two social service agencies in Toronto and presents a general analysis of the settlement sector providing LGBTQ+ newcomer specific services. The first agency has gained a reputation as a leading community health centre (CHC) that has provided a comprehensive

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package of services to LGBTQ+ newcomers for over a decade. Its current services for LGBTQ+ newcomers include primary healthcare, mental health counselling, resettlement support group sessions at two locations in East and West Toronto, one-on-one resettlement support sessions, annual Pride celebrations, and participation in the Toronto Pride march. The agency has also conducted research to capture LGBTQ+ newcomer women's experiences and has identified service gaps. The second social service agency's LGBTQ+ newcomer specific services were initiated in 2019. These include resettlement support group sessions, one-on-one resettlement support sessions and participation in the Toronto Pride march. Both agencies have anti-oppressive policies, which highlight sexual orientation and gender identities as marginalized social identities. These policies are actively put into practice in their programs. The two agencies creatively use their limited resources to enhance LGBTQ+ newcomer services by working collaboratively, encouraging voluntarism and promoting LGBTQ+ peer-led initiatives.

I have witnessed and experienced the impact of underfunding, and the limitations imposed by funders when maintaining services for LGBTQ+ newcomers. Clients having to wait a long time to access urgent services, limitations of service expansion to cope with increasing client numbers, as well as frontline worker burnouts, are among the most common impacts.

The province-based Newcomer Settlement Program (NSP) and the federal based funding provided by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) are the two major sources of funding for resettlement. Of these, the NSP covers funding for refugee claimants, while IRCC funding begins with the minimum requirement of clients having convention refugee status. In addition to immigration status, geographical confines impose service limitations. For example, for a newcomer to be eligible for some services at a settlement or healthcare agency in Toronto they must have a residential address whose postal code starts with 'M'. It is noteworthy that these limitations usually come with the package of funding, and are not necessarily imposed by the

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agencies. In fact, despite such limitations the two agencies that I have worked with make genuine attempts to include the clients who seek support.

A majority of LGBTQ+ refugee claimants and appellants have IFHP coverage for primary healthcare while non-status people do not have any health coverage. Non-status people include asylum seekers who are yet to submit their refugee claims, and those who have exhausted the avenues of refugee claim except that they can stay for humanitarian and compassionate grounds. A substantial number of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers require healthcare immediately after their arrival because of the extreme torture and trauma they had faced in their home countries. A couple of CHCs, including the one I was attached to, and a few social sector agencies have made provisions for urgent healthcare for them, even though these are still inadequate.

Despite the greater presence of LGBTQ+ newcomers in Toronto over the years, services for them are largely stagnant and remain under a handful of agencies. Mule and Gates-Gasse (2012) highlight that even though many LGBTQ+ newcomers use shelters “there are few or no provisions that address homophobia and transphobia in the shelter system and safety is a constant concern” (p. 7). In fact, I am aware of some violent attacks because of transphobia, homophobia and racism faced by some of my clients who ended up in hospitals. There are a few shelters in Toronto where LGBTQ+ newcomers have felt safer and welcomed.

Giwa and Chaze (2018), making a content analysis of the inclusivity of LGBTQ+ immigrants, emphasize that an overwhelming majority of settlement agencies in Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador do not have any programs for LGBTQ+ immigrants. They highlight that even the few immigration and settlement service agencies that have LGBTQ+ newcomer specific programs in Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, operate from a dominant heteronormative logic, which erases LGBTQ+ newcomers’ experiences, making them still more invisible. Even though federal, provincial and local governments are the key funders of these



agencies, there is no systemic policy to transform such agencies into authentic positive spaces. These realities explain the degree to which the settlement sector is lagging behind when serving LGBTQ+ newcomers. The state policies on immigration change substantially depending on the political party in power. They reveal how neo-conservative and liberal discourses have led to curbing service expansion through funding cuts, despite the increasing number of arrivals of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.

### **Impacts of Dominant Political Discourses on the LGBTQ+ Refugee Determination**

LGBTQ+ refugee claims are determined based on two factors: identity of the claimant and credibility of the claim. First and foremost, claimants must prove that their identities – legal name, country of origin and citizenship, and date of birth – are authentic. Once the claimant's identity is established, the next step is to scrutinize the credibility of the claim, to determine that the claimant is genuinely LGBTQ+. Despite SOGIE guidelines given to the IRB board members, this is often a highly contentious judgement.

Harris (2017) quotes Janet Dench, the director of the Canadian Council for Refugees, in stating that at times Canadian officials are not sensitive enough to the realities of LGBTQ+ newcomers, shedding light on the dominant Canadian legal discourses of the LGBTQ+ refugee determination process. Lee and Brotman (2013) affirm that some IRB adjudicators continue to incorporate stereotypical notions of sexuality and gender identities in their decision-making. They stress that such stereotyping is also racialized. They quote Henry and Tayler (2009), emphasising that “racialization can be understood as social processes that determine a social hierarchy linked to the term race, whereby racialized ‘others’ are constructed, differentiated, stigmatized, and excluded”. Thus, the unequal social relations between the refugee and the citizen continue to be ingrained in a system that is seen outwardly as a ‘gift’, but it is inherently *violent*.

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The refugee determination process captures the immense power a single Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) member wields when determining the life (or possible death, by rejection) of a psychologically fragile SOGIE claimant, within a few hours, in a very intimidating hearing room (Rousseau, Crepeau, Foxen & Houle, 2002). Through my frontline work I have seen that in some negative decisions, these IRB members have even refused to accept as credible evidence psychological reports made by Canadian psychiatrists and psychologists. Rehaag (2018) points out that in 2017, despite the implementation of SOGIE guidelines, the percentages of positive decisions made by IRB members ranged from 97.9% to 19.2%! The Refugee Appeal Division (RPD) has overturned on their merits one third of the negative decisions made by IRB members. In her CBC article, Harris (2017) highlights the dubiousness of the government's lack of commitment to strengthening policy and training for visa officers. SOGIE guidelines are mere guidelines which the IRB members can opt to use. Rehaag's (2018) explanation above proves the limits of SOGIE guidelines to bring about significant change.

### *Questionable Media Portrayals*

Branding asylum seekers, including LGBTQ+, as 'illegal' has been a heated debate in recent mainstream Canadian political and media discourses. This is a term first coined by the Conservative party of Canada, whose website (n.d.) still has an online petition against Mr. Trudeau's tweet "#welcometoCanada last year" and claims that "since then more than 38,000 border crossers have illegally entered into Canada". Hill (2018), citing legal experts and human rights advocates, including Amnesty International and the UN, criticizes Lisa MacLeod, Ontario's minister for immigration, who labelled as 'illegal' the asylum seekers crossing the Southern border. "There is nothing illegal when you come and you cross the border to claim asylum", he quotes Jean-Nicolas Beuze from the UNHCR, and adds that Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act on this is "very clear". The IRCC website (n.d.) uses the term

‘irregular’ to identify such border-crossers. Such rhetoric dehumanizes those who are forced to flee for their lives, distracts the real issues of forced migration and flatly violates the basis of the Geneva Convention on refugees, which Canada has signed (Ellis & Stam, 2017).

Elash, Swain and Carman (2017) expose the dominant Canadian legal and media lens on LGBTQ+ refugees, particularly with respect to their claims based on bisexuality. They question the high volume of Nigerian SOGIE asylum claims lodged in Ontario and state that the acceptance rates of claims from Nigeria have been reduced to 54%, as against 73% from all other countries, since 2013, to validate their suspicions around legitimacy.

Rehaag (2009) counter the arguments against bisexual claimants stating that bisexuals are notably less likely to be accepted than other SOGIE claimants as they are more prone to be doubted as fraudulent. Unlike in countries of the Global South where refugees originate, bisexuality, because of its span and scope, is much contested in the western sexuality discourse, which rigidly compartmentalizes sexual and gender identities. Bisexuality not only disrupts exclusive categories of sexuality but also the exclusive and distinct taxonomy of the gender binary (Rodriguez, 2016). Yet, when identified with bisexuality, racialized women and the working classes are particularly stigmatized, limiting “...queer political alliances with sex workers, immigrants, indigenous [sic] populations, and the poor that could align to improve the life changes of diverse populations impacted by racism, poverty, violence, police brutality, and inequality” (p. 174). I am well aware, from my own work, of the confusions of some LGBTQ+ refugees about their bisexual identity. Their responses range from, “because I was married back home” – frequently as a survival tactic, or forced to – “my lawyer said I must be bisexual”, to their view that being in a straight marriage would make them bisexual, even if given no choice. Life-long internalized homophobia also makes some think that if they are married and have

procreated, having a ‘side affair’ with a same-sex partner would be justified or tolerated according to their culture.

The Appendix shows that gaining protected status is the most crucial step in resettlement. Yet this is precisely where the bottleneck exists. For example, until recently thousands of legacy cases (claims made before December 2012), were in limbo without a hearing date. A substantial number of new cases are being indefinitely postponed, while the appeal process may take years. Failed (non-status) appellants go underground with no access to healthcare, credible employment, education or housing. They stay as ‘sub-human’, denied basic humanity, if they are lucky enough to remain so before they are hunted and deported by the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA).

### **Advocacy, Resistance and Strategies for Change**

Providing recommendations is an arduous task as the Canadian LGBTQ+ refugee claim process is entrenched in the discourse of Canadian national identity that continues to be built on settler-colonialism, neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy (Kinsman, 2018; Murray, 2016, Fobear, 2014). Developing progressive fronts and allying with grassroots movements to combat all forms of systemic oppression – racism, sexism, settler-colonialism and many others – would be the first step towards a more just society, one that would embrace LGBTQ+ newcomers as fully human. Despite the idealistic undertone, this must be noted considering social work’s notorious *modus operandi* that fosters nationalist ideologies with policy making and measures of surveillance (Fortier & Wong, 2018).

In this disintegrated era of neoliberalism there are scattered yet powerful grassroots social organizations such as Black Lives Matter, No One Is Illegal Toronto and Fight for \$15 and Fairness that include LGBTQ+ newcomers in their movements of resistance. Black Lives Matter Toronto (BLM-TO), holding up the corporatized 2016 Toronto Pride parade to reclaim visibility

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and social inclusion for racialized bodies by expelling the pink-washed, racist police force, was a remarkable victory that has empowered millions. As Greedy (2018) explains, BLM-TO threatened the very “legitimacy of dominant notions of Canadian multi-culturalism, homonormativity, and homonationalism” (p. 663). They inspired action that led to the withdrawal of uniformed police officers from Pride parades in Vancouver, Halifax, New York City, Minneapolis and other North American cities. No One Is Illegal Toronto (NOII-TO) is especially relevant and significant for LGBTQ+ newcomers in their organizing against detention, deportation and precarious employment. In 2012 they initiated action that led to a public policy win in declaring Toronto Canada’s first sanctuary city. Fight for \$15 and Fairness is another movement that operates within an anti-racist, anti-oppressive (ARAO) framework. This is especially relevant as so many LGBTQ+ newcomers are extremely precariously employed. I have taken part in these social movements. I have stimulated political awareness and engagement of LGBTQ+ newcomers by inviting representatives from these movements into LGBTQ+ newcomer support spaces that I continue to organize.

### **Suggestions for Better Practices**

I would begin with a process of queering spaces that entails decolonizing, normalizing and bringing queerness into the centre. Queering in this sense is emancipatory for 2SLGBTQ+ people as it neutralizes the pervasive heteronormative gaze in institutional policies and practices. For LGBTQ+ newcomers, queering their supportive spaces of resettlement is of paramount importance as it involves policy changes and improved action at every level. Queering also entails action equity. Based on Rainbow Health Network (2010), Giwa and Chaze (2018) and my frontline experience, the following steps for better practices are suggested:

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1. Recognize that 2SLGBTQ+ people exist everywhere, with all different marginalized populations – single parents, parents, seniors, people with disabilities, pregnant women, youth and children. Some of them might be visible while others might not be.
2. Identify subtle and blatant heteronormative policy frameworks and improve them by operationalizing a genuine queer lens. To begin with, use inclusive language: partner or spouse instead of husband/wife; use the ‘they’ pronoun instead of ‘she/he’.
3. Advocate for policy changes to eliminate cis-normativity (e.g. all-gender washrooms, signing off with gender pronouns, instead of expecting only 2-spirit and trans people to do so.
4. Hire 2SLGBTQ+ people, in particular, 2-Spirit, Trans, Black and Newcomer identities.
5. Train staff and be trained. Make positive spaces and anti-oppressive training mandatory.
6. Work collaboratively in the sector. Learn from agencies that are more 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive.
7. Work on raising consciousness and advocacy as LGBTQ+ newcomers’ pre-migration experiences have compounding impacts on their resettlement process.
8. Avoid making assumptions based on stereotypical behaviours. The acronym 2SLGBTQ+ is heavily North American or Western. Sexuality and gender identities embrace a wide and fluid spectrum. LGBTQ+ newcomers and immigrants, depending upon their cultural backgrounds, may not open themselves out. Provide a caring and a supportive presence.
9. Introduce yourself as a 2SLGBTQ+ person or an ally, along with your gender pronouns. It is important to make an appropriate disclosure of yourself. It will help you make a very important connection with your clients.
10. Encourage your clients to ask questions. Explain that no question is considered ‘silly’.
11. Explain the rights of your clients for competent and confidential service. These include explaining the process of making a complaint if someone (including yourself) has been rude

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or unwelcoming to the client. Stress that such a complaint will not impact on their access to services within the agency.

12. Be aware that people do not belong to only one category of social location. Recognize that social locations or positions are multiple, fluid as well as interlocking. Some of them belong to dominant identity categories while others are not. As a result, we can be both victims and perpetrators.
13. Understand that people who live with multiple marginalized identities do not just face extra barriers; their entire lived experiences are different and are constantly recreated by such marginalities.
14. Multiple social locations such as sexual orientation, gender, race, ability, age, being new, immigration status, language, dis/ability and lived experiences of torture and trauma impact on resettlement. Identify their impacts and provide a comfortable pacing for each person.
15. Recognize embedded power hierarchies in formal, institutional spaces and service provisions. Do not let your efforts to liberate through your work perpetuate relations of dominance.
16. Be aware of microaggressions and introduce policies that help eliminate their roots. They can make different spaces toxic. They can cause LGBTQ+ newcomers and other marginalized clients to shy away. Create avenues for victims of microaggressions to safely talk about them.
17. Develop an unquenchable thirst for new knowledge. Never stop learning.
18. Learn from your clients. Supportive agency spaces exist only because of their client populations, not the other way around. Your clients are the sources of your knowledge, insights, learning, guidance, inspiration, power and hope.
19. Do not hesitate to apologize to your clients for mistakes. Make such apologies genuine and unconditional. Make a commitment to taking concrete preventative action as an integral part of such apologies.

20. Advocate relentlessly for positive change, however trivial it seems to be. Learn from histories; their many representations and interpretations.
21. While creating systems that are conducive to positive social change, be the change that you yourself envisage. Bring others on to that path of liberation.
22. Acknowledge the historic and ongoing settler-colonialism in North America. Take to your heart that there is no social justice without justice for Indigenous Peoples, and justice delayed is justice denied! Connect newcomers – LGBTQ+ and straight – with movements of justice for Indigenous Peoples.

**Instead of A Conclusion...**

There are yet more measures I need to take to refocus on my learning, joining grassroots movements and community mobilizing by bringing Indigeneity to the centre of our political struggles. Wolf (2009) provides an initial guide by pointing out that “modern bourgeois ideology assumes that we need not trace the genealogy of heterosexuality because it must be a timeless concept and practice. But just as homosexuality was invented, so was heterosexuality” (p. 40). Smith (2013) reminds me that “colonial rule always targeted diverse modes of embodiment and desires as sexual transgressions in order to control Indigenous communities in its quest to successfully dispossess and occupy Native land” (p. 469). Even the acronym 2SLGBTQ+ underscores a rigid, settler-colonial gender-binary system, whereas genders and sexualities are fluid spectra. Bradford et al. (2019) reminds me to challenge the normative gender binary aspirations even within trans communities. Greensmith and Giwa (2013) stress the need to challenge the parasitical settler-colonial traits in contemporary queer politics. Settler-colonialism, as a vicious offshoot of capitalism, absorbs every human action and every seemingly progressive space into its continuous expansion. Even those progressive queer political spaces that do not focus on decolonizing leading to Indigenous sovereignty fall into this trap.



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Thus, the real challenge is to transform Queer spaces, including the LGBTQ+ newcomer-focused spaces into living spaces of decolonization, the spaces that also honour Treaty rights and commit to Indigenous sovereignty. This is where broader frameworks of decolonizing should fit in, as proliferation of transphobia and homophobia on the current global scale is predominantly a historic and an ongoing colonial project. Social workers should learn Indigenous worldviews, which do not have the colonial constructs of gender binary and homosexuality.

Multiple challenges unfold the multiple roles that can be played and the multiple opportunities that exist to resist and reorganize. I see social work as another site for resistance to learn and mobilize collectively. This is, of course, an arduous and on-going political endeavour.

### Appendix

	Eligibility for resettlement services		Time
	No	Yes	
<b>Asylum Seekers:</b> those who arrive with visitor's visa, student visa or without any form of entry visa and intend to claim refugee status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healthcare,</li> <li>Social assistance (Ontario Works)</li> <li>Education</li> <li>Employment</li> <li>Longer term subsidized housing</li> <li>Resettlement agency support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited access to healthcare if becomes a threat to public health</li> <li>Accommodation and food in shelters</li> </ul>	Three or more months, up to the time of submitting the refugee claim
<b>Refugee claimants:</b> Asylum seekers after	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education (except ESL)</li> <li>Longer term subsidized housing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healthcare and some drug benefits under the IFH Coverage</li> </ul>	Two to three months, or more if refugee

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<p>making a refugee claim and receiving an identity document from the federal government</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post-secondary education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social assistance from Ontario Works and legal aid if proved to have no income</li> <li>• Some access to (often precarious &amp; temporary) employment once a work permit is obtained)</li> <li>• Limited employment agency support, depending on the funder of the agency</li> <li>• High school education if the claimant is under 21 years</li> </ul>	<p>hearings postponed</p>
<p><b>Convention refugees:</b> whose claims have been accepted and become protected persons</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment agency support (some based on funders’ requirements)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OHIP healthcare coverage</li> <li>• Some employment agency support – based on their funders’ requirements</li> </ul>	<p>Three to four months, or more if refugee hearings postponed</p>
<p><b>Permanent Residents</b></p>	<p>N/A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OHIP healthcare coverage</li> <li>• Employment support</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Eligible for subsidized housing (low-income)</li> <li>• Resettlement agency support</li> </ul>	<p>Approximately 1.5 years after becoming a convention refugee</p>
<p><b>Non-status people</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Settlement services are minimum, it is up to the discretion of some settlement agencies</li> <li>• No access to education</li> </ul>	<p>Non-status people usually remain undercover for</p>	

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extremely limited access to healthcare: any limited access is only through non-insured walk-in clinics</li> <li>• Can renew the work permit annually, renewal is up to the discretion of the</li> <li>• Can apply to stay, under humanitarian and compassionate grounds, after a minimum of one year, once all avenues of appeal are exhausted and managed to stay undercover – this application requires proof that the applicant is well resettled with community connections and work</li> </ul>	<p>several years.</p> <p>Some get caught by the Canadian Border Services Agency and is deported, others apply to stay under humanitarian and compassionate grounds</p>
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**Abbreviations**

ARAO	Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CBSA	Canadian Border Services Agency
CHC	Community Health Centre/s
IFH	Interim Federal Health
IRB	Immigration and Refugee Board
IRCC	Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and many different sexual orientations and gender identities
NOII-TO	No One Is Illegal Toronto
OHIP	Ontario Health Insurance Plan

RPD	Refugee Appeal Division
SDOH	Social Determinants Of Health
SOGIE	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees

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