

Homestays can help refugee women adapt to life in a new country

June 30 2024, by Areej Al-Hamad and Kateryna Metersky



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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [more than 117 million people](#) are displaced worldwide. Many of those displaced from their homes are women and girls. In 2020, women and

girls constituted about 46% of the refugees [who were resettled in Canada](#)

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Women and girls often contend with unique challenges from being displaced. There is a crucial need to understand the [gender-specific challenges and issues they face](#). As global displacement grows, the stories of those seeking refuge need to be heard and understood, not just to enhance their lives but also to enrich our communities.

[Our research](#) focuses on the homestay experiences of Ukrainian refugee [women](#) in the Greater Toronto Area. We explore how thoughtful, inclusive homestay programs can make a significant difference in women's lives.

Canada has opened its doors to refugees fleeing the conflict in Ukraine. However, the path to settling these newcomers involves uncovering the complex layers of social, cultural, economic, health and personal challenges.

Homestays in Canada

Homestays are a model that is different from programs like [private sponsorship](#), where individuals, organizations and associations can sponsor refugees by raising funds to support them when they first arrive in Canada. Homestays entail a refugee living with the [host](#) family in the same home. These homes are offered by families or individuals, [many of whom are refugees or immigrants themselves](#).

The homestay—often a refugee's first encounter with Canadian society—is not just about providing a roof over their heads. It's also about ensuring safety, dignity and integration into a new place and society.

Although homestay programs aim to ease the transition and improve the well-being of refugees, the intricate dynamics of these interactions and their overall effects on both refugees and their host families are still not thoroughly examined.

Research specifically focused on the dynamics of homestay arrangements and their impact on relationships between refugees and their hosts is quite scarce, yet available studies reveal an array of advantages and disadvantages.

However, [research indicates](#) that such arrangements can enhance integration, social connections and a sense of belonging. In addition, [studies indicate](#) that hosting refugees in private homes could challenge negative stereotypes and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Challenges of homestays

Homestays play a crucial role in [initial stages of integrating into a new place](#). In homestays, individuals often encounter new cultural, social, or linguistic environments that intensely challenge them and stimulate growth, adaptation, and integration into a new community or setting.

However, the current homestay model can be unpredictable, leaving considerable room for improvement. There is a need for a model that is considerate of the unique vulnerabilities and strengths of refugee women. Living in someone else's home can often come with the pressure to be a good guest. That represents a conditional aspect of private hosting, where refugees need to [demonstrate their worthiness of being hosted](#).

In our ongoing study involving 18 refugee women from Ukraine, we asked them to share some photos that represent their homestay experiences. The study documented the personal stories of Ukrainian

refugee women through photography. It provides a powerful narrative vehicle for these women to express their experiences and challenges in navigating the complexities of their settlement and new environments.

The women's experiences illustrate a range of outcomes—from profound gratitude and mutual cultural enrichment, to significant challenges in privacy, autonomy and adaptation. Many expressed gratitude for the safety and support their hosts provide, which often also includes assistance navigating language barriers and cultural integration. These relationships frequently lead to mutual cultural enrichment, with both hosts and guests learning about each other's customs and traditions.

Many women shared experiences of learning new languages and customs, participating in Canadian traditions and forming lasting bonds with their hosts. These positive interactions underscore the potential of homestays to facilitate smooth transitions for refugees into Canadian society.

On the other hand, some challenges are evident, particularly in terms of maintaining privacy and autonomy. Living in close quarters with hosts can sometimes lead to feelings of dependency and a lack of personal space, which complicates the adjustment process. Additionally, adapting to new household norms and expectations can add an extra layer of stress to the already complex experience of resettlement.

Improving homestays

Issues such as a lack of privacy, limited autonomy, cultural misunderstandings and even exploitation emerged from women's stories. These suggest that the homestay experience can sometimes exacerbate the trauma already endured by [refugees](#).

What Canada needs is an inclusive and responsive homestay model,

ongoing support, training for hosts and a commitment to understanding the intercultural dynamics at play. There must be a structured, empathetic approach to organizing homestays, emphasizing the need for comprehensive training for hosts.

This training should cover cultural sensitivity, the [basic legal rights of refugees](#) and effective communication strategies. This would better ensure that both hosts and guests have realistic expectations and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Assistance from federal, provincial and non-governmental organizations is needed to develop a support network for refugee women in homestays—including providing access to counseling, [legal advice](#) and emergency assistance—to ensure their safety and well-being.

Our research advocates for a homestay model that better supports refugee women who face particular challenges and vulnerabilities when they arrive in a new country. A well-structured, empathetic homestay program could better ensure they gain a solid foundation for building a new life in a new country.

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