

# The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Canadian Media

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a critical analysis of Canadian media content (*The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, *Huffington Post*, *CBC*, and *CTV*), from September 2015 to April 2016, of the coverage of the Canadian resettlement effort of Syrian refugees, including representation of the refugees and the Canadian government and public. The analysis is informed by theories of orientalism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and feminism.

## **Introduction**

The Syrian crisis has a complex geo-political history, and the involvement of the international and Canadian governments has been influential (see RCIS Working Paper 2017/2 by Tyyskä et al.). The current refugees number close to 5 million worldwide, and Canada accepted and resettled 28,499 of them as of June 20th 2016 (CIC 2016).

While the resettlement and humanitarian efforts along with international involvement in the military and peace-making actions in Syria are ongoing, it is also important to reflect on the role of media in the coverage of the refugee crisis. Based on the much-debated premise that media both reflect and shape public opinion and government actions (Macnamara 2005), a group of Ryerson students from the Immigration and Settlement Studies MA Program, along with a faculty member, initiated the "Syria Project", the aim of which was to both provide background information on the Syrian crisis and the Syrian refugee resettlement in Canada (see RCIS Working Paper 2017/2) and an analysis of Canadian media content on the issue.

Our media content analysis is founded on the theories of postcolonialism and orientalism; in both theories, the "west" is contrasted to the "rest" (Breckenbridge & van der Veer 1995). Both theories rely on "othering" non-western people. Postcolonial theory specifically analyses and criticizes the ways in which the colonizers distort and assign inferiority to the colonized, and deny their agency and attempts to reclaim their "inevitable Otherness" while also presenting them as a threat to western values (Al-Saidi 2014). The theoretical framework of orientalism, put forth by Edward Said (1978) helps address the ways in which the inferiority of non-western cultures is expressed, and the "othering" that is specifically targeted at the Middle East, the Arabs, and Muslims/Islam. Based on these frameworks, we propose that the presence of Syrian refugees in the "west" is received with fear and apprehension and that this population will be subject to "othering" including negative stereotypes, criminalization (of men in particular – see below), and perceptions of the refugees' passivity and neediness.

In addition to these major theoretical frameworks, our analysis will take into account the political economy framework in situating Syrian refugees in a neo-liberal policy paradigm in advanced capitalist societies of the “west”. As summarized by Shields et al. (2016: 12):

...neoliberalism is based on belief in the value of the free movement and accumulation of capital, minimal state intervention in the private sphere of markets and individual rights, and a restructuring of the public domain with the aim of shrinking the state and undoing the Keynesian logic embedded in government after the Second World War...

A central part of neoliberalism is the reliance on the private sector and individuals for the delivery of services that used to be the domain of the welfare state. In keeping with this discourse, we anticipate that refugees are likely to be seen and depicted as a drain on government resources, and the emphasis is more likely to be on the private sector and individual citizens to volunteer to help them. Along with this goes a depiction of the Canadian public as generous and altruistic which are assumed to be superior “Canadian values”.

Additionally, feminist scholars provide an understanding of how gender relations are socially constructed and used to support patriarchal forms of oppression in which there are generally accepted differences between men and women, along with a hierarchy that privileges men (Randall 2010). Intersections with racialized status and other social identities provide additional hierarchies (Das Gupta 2000, Zayzafoon 2005). When this lens is applied to orientalism and neocolonialism, we can anticipate differential treatment and depiction of Syrian refugee men and women. Indeed, it has been argued that while Muslim asylum seekers are generally likely to be identified as security risks (Amin-Khan 2015), this depiction is more likely to be aimed at men while women and children are more likely to be seen as vulnerable and needy (Zayzafoon 2005). Orientalism and patriarchy work in conjunction with one another to produce gendered representations of Muslim women and men that both homogenize and “other” them. Accordingly, we expect to find images in our media analysis depicting Syrian male refugees as threats and Syrian female refugees as vulnerable.

Further, when we apply a feminist lens to neo-liberalism (Thobani 2000; Arat-Koç 2012), it has been argued that it is part of neo-liberalism to “invisibilize”, “individualize”, and “culturalize” women, and particularly immigrant and racialized women (Arat-Koç 2012; Nichols and Tyyskä 2015). In other words, it is assumed that gender inequality has been eradicated, when in reality women are absent from the public eye and public discussions, and immigrant and racialized women have been homogenized and othered, based on reductionist and negative depictions of “culture”. Based on this line of thinking, we are anticipating that women’s voices are heard less in media and that specifically Syrian women are depicted in keeping with cultural stereotypes of Muslim women (see Zayzafoon 2005) which see them as oppressed, silent, and needy.

## Research Design

Based on thematic qualitative media content analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Macnamara 2005), members of the research team analyzed the following print media content: 94 articles from the *Globe and Mail*; 80 articles from the *National Post*; and 130 articles from the *Toronto Star*. Additionally, 84 videos were analyzed as a cluster, including 16 from the AOL *Huffington Post* site, 57 YouTube site CTV videos, and 11 YouTube site CBC videos.

The main key words used in the media searches were: "Syria", "refugee", and "Canada". The final selection from a much larger number of hundreds of sources was made based on the article being of some length and substantive content (excluding short "newsflash" types of reports); having clear Canadian content relating to Syrian refugees; content with representation of Syrian refugees; content about public perceptions of the Syrian refugee crisis; and topics regarding the settlement of Syrian refugees along with actions of the Canadian government.

We utilized a "group process" for collecting, coding, and analyzing data (Wasser & Bresler 1996). While each team member worked independently on a particular media source, the research team met regularly to discuss the data collection process and the analysis and generation of themes, along with application of theory. This ensured that there was uniformity in the research process while it also brought out any differences in themes and interpretations arising from different media sources, as each team member brought out the nuances specific to the media sources they analyzed. This task was made easier by dividing the media sources by type, as listed above.

The research was a combination of a conventional and directed approach to media research (Hsieh & Shannon 2005), which is akin to grounded theory (Strauss & Juliet 1994) in that the themes arose both directly from the contents analyzed, and from group discussions of analytical and theoretical elements arising from the contents. The primary approach can be characterized as critical media analysis, aimed at researching media involvement in the social construction of reality (Macnamara 2005; Stocchetti & Kukkonen 2011). The final analysis was informed by the theories of orientalism, postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and feminism which will be discussed in relation to their applicability to the different thematic clusters.

## Results

Based on continuous group-based content analysis and discussions, there was agreement that the main themes were:

- (1) "Canadian values", with the positive representation of Canadian government and public as humanitarian and generous;
- (2) representation of Syrian refugees as lacking agency, vulnerable and

needy amidst challenges; and

(3) gendered representation of Syrian male refugees as security threats, with an absence of women's voices.

(1) "*Canadian values*": *humanitarianism and generosity*

Of the 94 *Globe and Mail* articles, 28 urged the Canadian government to be more proactive in helping Syrian refugees, highlighting that it is a core Canadian value. A number of articles presented quotes from Canadian politicians and community leaders, to emphasize this moral duty. For example, B.C. Mayor Nancy Wilhelm-Morden is quoted as saying: "[I]magine if every town and city across Canada did this, just take three or four families. What a difference we could make" (Friesen et al. 2015). The public is praised for its generosity, as in a quote from Chris Friesen, director of settlement services for the Immigrant Services Society of B.C.: "[W]hat we're hearing constantly is the public would rather see them on cots, on church floors, rather than spend another night in a tent in a refugee camp" (Chase 2015).

Even as roadblocks occurred during the process of settling Syrian refugees, acts that were benevolent were attributed to Canadian values, and acts that were hostile could be characterized as un-Canadian. For example, after the incident of pepper-spraying of Syrian refugees by a man on a bicycle in Vancouver, the *Globe and Mail* issued an article including a tweet from Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stating "[t]his isn't who we are - and doesn't reflect the warm welcome Canadians have offered" (Jang 2016).

Showing its Conservative partisan political stripes, the *National Post's* attention to Canadian values and the duty to help refugees is evident in its criticism of the Liberal government's refugee plan. A total of 16 articles made reference to this theme. The refugee target of 25,000 was discussed in terms of its viability, moral obligation, and support, with criticism of the government-imposed deadline for refugee arrivals in the end of 2015, combined with criticism of delays in fulfilling the obligation. The focus was shifted towards the government's deadline, rather than the actual plight of the refugees, as the PC immigration critic Michelle Rempel is reported to have said that "Canadians are going to figure out that a lot of the Liberal platform was smoke and mirrors" (Berthiaume, 2016). Keeping track of the numbers of refugees was an ongoing theme until the target of 25,000 was achieved in February 2016. Questions about the sense of urgency for the target were raised, exemplified in the comment, "surely Canada's settlement agencies could now provide ample evidence of the folly of an immigration plan based on arbitrary deadlines. Perhaps it's time for the government of Canada to put the scorecard away" (*National Post*, January 28, 2016). The government is represented as not fulfilling its promises and failing to meet its randomly set target. The public is represented as questioning the broader plan for immigration (Berthiaume 2016).

In the *Toronto Star*, an opposing political view emerges, reflecting left of centre/liberal leanings. The focus of 26 *Toronto Star* articles was on the

Conservative Government's lack of moral values. Until the federal election, *Toronto Star's* coverage of the government's involvement in the Syrian refugee crisis mainly focused on undermined Canadian traditions. Burman (September 12, 2015) and Keenan (September 4, 2015) were critical of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's attitude, suggesting it was making Syrian refugees' situation worse, and violating Canadian values, with Keenan asking: "...what are elections for if not deciding what kind of country we are? And what helps define what kind of country we are than how we deal with the largest humanitarian crisis in generations?"

Notably, out of the 90 *Toronto Star* articles, 55 reflect on what represents Canadian values, in particular, generosity by Canadians and the need to meet humanitarian obligations. One particular trend in the *Toronto Star* reporting was frequent references to the record of humanitarian acts of Canadians and their government with regard to past refugee groups. In reference to a letter signed by hundreds of academics, demanding a positive response from the Harper Government to the global refugee crisis, Stephen Spencer notes that "the letter describes offering aid to displaced people as written into Canadian DNA, citing the country's assistance to displaced Hungarians, Czechs, Vietnamese and Kosovars, among others" (October 13, 2015). Similarly, after Harper's Conservative Government was replaced by Trudeau's Liberal Government after the elections, Minister John McCallum is reported to have said; "I suspect I'm the only immigration minister in the world who has the problem of having to struggle to keep up with the generosity of Canadians wanting to sponsor refugees" (Keung, April 8, 2016).

Similar positive terms were used by other media. Of the 84 video sources, 14 depicted Canadian communities as benevolent and caring, another 11 depicted Canadians as compassionate while 3 depicted Canadians as empathetic to Syrians' plight, and yet another few depicted Canadians and their government as humanitarian. When asked about the ability of smaller cities to provide affordable housing to Syrian refugees, Immigration Minister John McCallum is reported as having said that the government and the settlement sector were actively working together. He affirmed that Canadians were welcoming to Syrians, and said "I am assured that these refugee settlement agencies - they're very professional and they're very humanitarian. They are very caring about the refugees, they have devoted their lives to looking after the refugees" ("McCallum: some cities have asked for a slowdown", CBC News).

Many of the video stories contrast Canadians before and after the arrival of Syrian refugees. Community leader Elizabeth Dove is reported to have said: "we have a fear of the other coming from a violent place with a minority religion... [but] we have history on our side, we have a system on our side - a Canadian government system... and we have the moral imperative on our side. There are families in need of our help" ("Sleeping outside for Syrian refugees" CBC news). Additionally, 5 videos capture the views of children and their innocence as a way to assert the compassion of welcoming refugees. The focus on family and children seemed to justify the government's commitment and re-spark the

public's interest. Addie Tinhold, an 8 year old Canadian girl, was featured on CBC news, with the comment that "her big birthday wish this week was to sponsor a refugee family from Syria" ("Girl, 8, wants to sponsor Syrian family", CBC).

### *Analysis*

Our analysis supports the frameworks of postcolonialism and orientalism. Based on the above summary of the role of "Canadian values" in the reporting of the Syrian refugee situation, it is clear that the media engage in the process of "othering" Syrian refugees. In all of the media sources we analyzed, Canadian citizens, politicians, and other public actors speak on behalf of refugees and exemplify a "saviour complex" that marginalizes Syrian refugees while offering a narrative of humanitarian and generous Canadians. Any racist or anti-Islamic acts such as an incident of pepper-spraying of refugees, are dismissed as uncharacteristic of Canadians. The media reports seek to uphold Canada's role as a saviour of refugees. This is a common strand, despite differences in partisan-political slants between the media. Any criticism meted out at either Harper or Trudeau or their governments is reported as moral failures, not in keeping with Canadian values, and anything politicians say to praise Canadians' generosity, gets reported.

A central part of neoliberalism is the reliance on the private sector and individuals for the delivery of services that used to be the domain of the welfare state. This mentality is evident in the way that the media reports put emphasis on the role of Canadians as private citizens, whose volunteering and generous spirit saves the day. Neoliberalism is manifested in the emphasis of the role of individuals and the private sector to help Syrian refugees. The pressure put on the private sector is framed as a way that highlights positive "Canadian values" of generosity and community volunteerism.

### *(2) Syrian refugees as vulnerable and needy amidst challenges*

The theme of Syrian refugees as vulnerable, desperate and in need of saving emerged in 23 of the 94 *Globe and Mail* articles. Although the media intent may have been to show the depth of the humanitarian crisis, the articles in essence removed the agency and resilience of Syrian refugees by always portraying them as desperate and vulnerable. An article states "[T]he waiting time is way too long. People are losing hope; people are suffering dearly" (Dhillon, 2015). The sole article that addresses refugees' agency reflects on the difficulty of refugees leaving their country and coming to Canada; Saunders (2015) reports that it is "[r]eassuring, because it reminds us that refugees are not freeloading hordes seeking to break down the doors of the West, as some would portray it. Rather, they're badly jarred families trying to calculate the best path to safety and stability".

Meanwhile, the refugee issue was individualized, with an overwhelming focus on the Kurdi family, with 20 *Globe and Mail* articles making reference to them, while an additional 9 out of 15 articles on refugee lives also focused on



them. Alan Kurdi was the Syrian boy whose drowned body on the shores of Turkey in September 2015 was blazoned throughout western media.

The Kurdi family tragedy was also a main focus of the *National Post*, with 20 of the 80 articles referring to it and the plight of the Kurdi family. Aside from this, only a small number of the *National Post* articles was focused on the specific stories of other refugees, and the small number that were profiled were mostly males, with only a few entire families. The only woman written about was Alan Kurdi's aunt who lives in Canada. This same aunt was interviewed by the *Globe and Mail*, to support the theme of generous Canadians, by saying (in response to the incident of pepper spraying of a group of Syrian refugees by an individual): "[t]o be honest, Canadian people would not do this, the majority of them... they are big supporters to the refugees" (Jang 2016). This same sensibility of "good Canadians" was bolstered with other quotes, such as housing developer Ian Gillespie, who articulated in a statement that "We had a well-earned reputation for being good citizens. I think we lost some of that and have lost the concept of [us all] being immigrants" ("Vancouver's 'Most Powerful Man' To Temporarily House Syrian Refugees", *Huffington Post*).

The focus on the Kurdi tragedy was particularly prevalent in the video arena. The media has tended to use the word "galvanize" to describe the public's reaction ("Alan Kurdi: HuffPost Canada's Newsmaker"). Even though one can argue that this type of reporting managed to bring public attention to the plight of refugees, the tragic images of the dead Syrian boy sidelined many other refugees' stories.

In the *Toronto Star*, this media trend of ignoring a wider range of Syrian refugees' voices continues. Instead, there were interviews with members of other ethnic communities who came to Canada as a part of other refugee flows; or families who have children of the same age (Benzie, September 12, 2015); or local students who are at around the same age (Brown, September 23, 2015); and even CIC officers who assess refugee claimants (Jimenez, October 31, 2015). In interviews with a Vietnamese refugee, Deschamps (December 16, 2015) shows a list of 12 pieces of advice for Syrian refugees to "settle into a new life", or as the interviewee also implies, to "do *normal Canadian* things" [emphasis added]. Among the instructions for how to live Canada, are: buying coffee at Tim Hortons, signing up for Air Miles or a Shoppers Drug Mart Optimum loyalty card, and picking a hockey team they could cheer for (Deschamps, December 16, 2015). At the same time, private refugee sponsors received more press, as "unsung hero[es]" (Douara, December 10, 2015; Black, December 19, 2015).

Out of the 90 *Toronto Star* articles, 37 focus on how Syrian refugees felt when they arrived in Canada and what they experienced on the way to Canada, and collectively who they are. In particular, the influence of the photo of Alan Kurdi was crucial in forming an impression of who Syrian refugees are. Keung notes this effect: "[t]he picture made people realize how helpless and vulnerable he and other people really are" (Oct 14, 2015). In comparison with the generous

Canadian subjects, refugees are depicted as helpless, voiceless, and vulnerable. However, the coverage of the *Toronto Star* is slightly more inclusive of Syrian refugees than the *Globe and Mail* or *National Post*. Though refugee presence in reporting is still low and the general focus remains on their general needs and plight, the *Star* includes Syrian refugees from a variety of backgrounds, including a seriously ill person and his family (Ward, November 28, 2015), children who recently went back to school (Brown, January 7, 2016), a rare story of a family in which a woman and children speak about themselves as a representative of the family (Goffin & Reynolds, January 21, 2015), and highly educated and skilled Syrian refugees who ended up in unskilled employment (Keung, March 1, 2016a). This is still only 4 articles out of a total of 90, making it a rarity.

It is noteworthy that – amidst the plethora of homogenizing the Syrian refugees as passive and needy – only one article stands out as being from a more critical perspective. Keung (December 18, 2015) goes against the general trend by stating that: “[t]hey came out of war, conflicts and atrocities. We need to promote their resilience and offer them proper post migration support. The big message here is resilience, not pathology”.

Of the video sources, 23 depict refugees as needy or destitute. The visual media frequently interviewed former refugees for their perspectives on the arriving Syrian refugees. When asked what inspired Reverend Majed El Shafie to help Syrians, he said “I used to be one of them. I came here to this great nation 13 years ago, I came with just \$100 in my pocket, I had no friends, no sense of community - so I know their pain, I know they’ve lost everything...and here in this great nation I would not be half the man I am today without Canada in my life” (“Former refugee helping new arrivals”, CBC news). Though we are happy to read of the gratitude of a person who has made his way in Canada, this is another situation where a non-Syrian is interviewed, and the overall message is clearly that Canadians are a saviour nation, a point that will be further explained in the analysis below.

In the video sources, there were only 11 personal stories, 9 of them with men and only two with women. One of the major themes within this group of videos is family reunification. Videos on families did not include the perspective of women or children. Instead, stories of family reunification were told from the perspective of the male head of family. The only two exceptions were an interview with Tima Kurdi (of Alan Kurdi's family) – following the obsessive focus on this family's experiences – and the story of Christine Youssef who along with her mother is sponsoring 43 of her family members in Syria (“Mother and daughter sponsor 43 family members to Canada”, CTV News). Again, these stand out as rare instances.

An additional theme that connects to the issue of needs among refugees, is attention to the challenges they face in the settlement process, including frustration over the backlog in private sponsorship cases, which was a major theme in the 11 personal social media interviews. Of the 14 *Toronto Star* articles on this theme, the majority were published after the federal election. The articles

were likewise critical of the preparedness of the government and private sponsors, exemplified in DiManno's (November 25, 2015) reports that “in only vague terms – no benchmarks, no processing schedule, no dates – Immigration Minister John McCallum said Tuesday, as the government finally got around to explaining (recalibrating) its resettlement plan in a media briefing, that government sponsors will nevertheless total 25,000 by the end of 2016”.

Frustration by refugees and the general public was expressed over the government's announcement over the abrupt shut-down of the refugee application process on March 31 (Keung, April 1, 2016), and further delays forthcoming in 2017 (Porter, April 22, 2016).

In addition, the gap between the expected and the unexpected or the prepared and the unprepared was seen in four fields in the *Toronto Star* articles: housing, healthcare services, education, and employment. Lack of affordable housing, and temporary but overlong housing of refugees in hotels (Goffin & Reynolds, January 21, 2016; Porter, November 13, 2015; Boutilier, November 10, 2015; Brown, December 3, 2015) were identified. Deficiencies were found in health care services, including lack of availability of mental health care (Ward, November 28, 2015; Noor, January 7, 2016; Keung, March 2, 2016), despite the long-established evidence regarding the prevalence of mental health problems among refugees (Keung, November 18, 2015). Prenatal care and daily walk-in services also emerged as pressing needs of Syrian refugees (Keung, March 2, 2016). Despite the well prepared public schools (Brown, December 3, 2015; Brown, February 9, 2016), long stays in temporary hotel residences delayed the process of schooling Syrian refugee children, with traumatized parents understandably anxious about busing their children to schools (Brown, February 9, 2016). Porter's (Feb 13, 2016) article also identified the uneven quality of Syrian refugees' education and background as an issue making it difficult to assess the grade levels of Syrian refugee children. In this reporting of these settlement problems – albeit only a dozen among 130 articles – the *Toronto Star* is unique compared to the other media sources.

One of the major challenges for adults, presented in the *Toronto Star*, is finding employment, especially in the context of different Canadian requirements and habits (Keung, March 26, 2016), and the language barrier (Porter, February 13, 2016; Keung, March 1, 2016 a; Keung, March 1, 2016 b). Keung (March 26, 2016) also notes that the work available to the refugees is predominantly unskilled, with the danger of exploiting refugees as a cheap source of menial labour. Local employers are reported as showing their appreciation for getting naive workers for undesirable jobs. A Syrian refugee in the same article says that “I have met with two employers. They asked me about my work experience and if I would be available. They both had labour jobs available, but they are far from Mississauga and it would take me two hours to get there by bus. I'm a bit disappointed, but hopeful.” In contrast to the implied exploitation of the refugee population, one local Arab employer is reported as saying in an interview that “[i]t's hard to find Canadians to work in upholstery. Not many young Canadians are interested in learning the skills. We do have a training program. I think this is

a win-win for employers and our Syrian newcomers” (Keung, March 26, 2016).

In the videos, interviews conducted with Canadians who are sponsoring refugees or members of their family used the lens of the community and their support for these newcomers. The community support angle was also used as a critique towards the lag in processing of support for government sponsored refugees. In 13 videos, the focus was on affordable housing opportunities, jobs and other settlement challenges. After the Paris attacks in November, reporters prompted the public and politicians to address issues such as the costs associated with the transport of refugees and their settlement services, with 9 videos addressing this.

### *Analysis*

The assigning of neediness and passivity to refugees, combined with the low numbers of interviews with them, in favour of other expert or insider informants, reflects how the media engage in the process of “othering” Syrian refugees. It was pointed out in the previous section that the reports in general rely on reports by Canadians and non-Syrians. This reinforces the idea of a “saviour complex” that marginalizes Syrian refugees.

The lack of presence of Syrian refugees in their own stories was noted in February 2015, and comes from Ryerson University's journalism professor, Kamal Al-Solaylee, in Denette's (Feb. 21, 2016) *Canadian Press* article “How Syrian refugees arriving in Canada became ‘extras’ in their own stories”. Al-Solaylee expresses his gratitude for the warm welcomes but fears that the feel-good stories are “‘suck[ing] the oxygen’ out of important stories about what life in Canada is really like for immigrants and refugees after the welcome is over” (Denette, 2016). He shines light on the fact that newcomers struggle for the first few years to find employment and to adjust to a new pace of life and argues that “the media needs to do a better job at balancing lighter stories about refugees with stories about the harsh realities in their pasts and futures” (Denette, 2016).

The initial stories of Syrian refugees are touching but fail to explore their harsh realities of resettling in Canada. Where reports addressed barriers to resettlement, they emphasized language and cultural issues which can be seen as shortcomings of the refugees. Syrian refugees are more commonly depicted as vulnerable and needy victims. While a very small proportion of the reporting focuses on the structural barriers of finding employment and housing, or access to health care services and education, the bulk of the reporting focuses on needs and vulnerability, without a critical eye toward solutions. The advice given is individualized, leaving the impression that all that is required is to “do normal Canadian things” (Deschamps, 2015). At the same time, the theme of helpful Canadians as private sponsors continues. In our team's analysis, this overwhelming focus on individual responsibility directly reflects a neoliberal ethos with its emphasis on managing independently or with the help of the private sector. The valorization of individuals and the private sector also bolsters the idea of “core Canadian values”, elevating the “west” over the “rest”.

Further, a feminist analysis can be applied here. Only a handful of media interviewed women themselves, and none interviewed children. While refugees overall were underrepresented, in the selected articles, only Syrian male refugees and members of the Kurdi family were given any voice. This reflects an acceptance/endorsement of a patriarchal reality to the Syrian crisis, along with the hierarchies evident between silenced Muslim women and children compared to the slightly more visible men, something that also has a negative emphasis, as will be seen in the next section.

### *(3) Gendered representations: Syrian male refugees as a security threat*

In the *Globe and Mail*, 12 articles discussed Syrian refugees as security threats while 14 of the *National Post* articles manifest this fear, especially after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015 and the sexual assaults of local women by a group of men (some of whom were refugees) in Cologne in January 2016. These numbers are significant because no stories presented Syrian men in a positive light.

In the *Globe and Mail*, attention was brought to the policy that forbids single male refugees from entering Canada because Canadian refugee selection is based on “vulnerability”, giving preference to women, families, and LGBTQ people. While many members of the public were reportedly outraged by this decision, Aziz (2015) wrote: “the government has decided that the lives of some refugees are worth more than others...single men travelling alone will have their applications denied or deferred - as will orphans without relatives already in Canada - while families, religious minorities and LGBT individuals will be prioritized”. Moreover, McLaren (2015) commented on Prime Minister Trudeau’s actions, calling him out on his hypocrisy as he espouses ideals of “openness, egalitarianism and fairness” while closing the doors to some refugees. At the same time, The *Globe and Mail* reported many public leaders speaking out on behalf of the restrictive measures as a necessary safety precaution. For example, Raymond Louie, president of FCM stated: “The minister offered further assurance that the security of Canadians continues to be the priority for the government. We remain confident the government will meet its security obligations” (Leblanc et al. 2015).

Security concerns were also raised in the *Globe and Mail* articles, after the Paris attacks in November. Slater’s (2015) article feared that right-wing, anti-immigrant parties would use this as leverage to gain public support against the movement of Syrian refugees. However, the Canadian government is shown in a positive light, not letting world events deter them from helping refugees. Andrew Gee (2015) reflects on the fact that “[T]he head of the International Organization for Migration praised Canada’s welcoming stance toward refugees at a time of growing xenophobia in Europe and the United States, as he offered new details about the Liberal government’s plan to airlift thousands of Syrian asylum seekers into the country in the coming months”.

*Globe and Mail* reporters continued to stress that Canada, despite the chaos going on in the world, is not in harm’s way. In this process, the presence of

women and children serves as a reassurance that terrorism is not a threat. For example, an article by Friesen (2015) noted that Canada “will focus on resettling vulnerable refugees it assumes are a lower security risk, such as women at risk and complete families”. Laura Dawson, director of the Canada institute at the Wilson Center, a think tank in Washington D.C., was reported as stating: “Refugees coming to Canada are from low-risk groups- families with children, single mothers, LGBT men... Sixty percent are women and twenty-two percent are children. This is not an ISIS demographic” (as cited by Koring, 2016). MacKinnon (2016) confirms: “The Syrians arriving in Canada pose almost no security threat”. Nevertheless, Cheung and Muscati (2016) reported an instance where a sixteen year old male, Mohamed, was put in solitary confinement upon arrival in Canada, affirming the perception of a potential threat by Syrian males.

17 media videos depict Syrian refugees as security concerns or risks, along with sub-themes of responsibility, careful selection, and screening. After the Paris attacks in November 2015, the Canadian public was represented as cautious, but still generously compassionate for the French whereas there was a change in tone in reporting about refugees. Following this terrorist event, the words “tragedy” and “security” began to be used in the context of the government pledging to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada. When asked during an interview about the security concerns, Michael Molloy is reported as having said: “The whole security concern begins with how we frame who we are going to bring... [Our refugee resettlement system] focuses on the most vulnerable... the average terrorist is a single young man with weak family ties and very, very alienated. The people we are targeting are running for their lives” (“Trudeau committed to refugee goal”, CBC). The latter statements contribute to a narrative that Syrians are resourceless and vulnerable to exploitation by terrorist actors.

In a minor strand of reporting, the *Toronto Star* parts somewhat from the other media analyzed in this study, by returning to the theme of how the Canadian government can improve its humanitarian refugee regimes based on the “tradition” revived through the election. This attitude was seen to have been clearly demonstrated after the terrorist attack on Paris on November 13, 2015. While European countries became more exclusionary towards Syrian refugees, Canada and Canadians were depicted as gentle subjects who demonstrated generosity even during such turmoil. For example, a report mentions that “[w]e have a prime minister who remembers there was an election, and what he promised voters he would do. It appears we live in a democracy that is respected by our national leadership, and not undermined. How incredibly novel” (“After Paris, how Canada can be a leader”, November 21, 2015). At the same time, the *Toronto Star* maintains that the Trudeau Government statements of compassion were a strategy mainly taken to soothe the anxiety increased by the terrorist attacks in Paris while there was a continued emphasis on the “strong and robust” screening process of refugees (Spurr, November 16, 2015).

### *Analysis*

Critical anti-colonialist authors make clear links between migration and

securitization. The rights of migrants in their countries of arrival have deteriorated, and particularly Muslim asylum seekers are identified as security risks (Amin-Khan 2015). This is clear in our analysis of Canadian media content, and is also combined with gendered considerations, based on the depictions of Syrian male refugees as potential terrorists, and Syrian women and children as vulnerable. Media reports that describe Syrian refugees in relation to vulnerability and threat, can be attributed to the “semiotic subject that is produced and reproduced by Orientalist, Islamic, feminist, and nationalistic discourses” (Zayzafoon, 2005: 2). Orientalism and patriarchy work in conjunction with one another to produce gendered representations of Syrian refugees, women as vulnerable and males as security threats, and overall as inferior to Canadian residents and Canadian-born citizens. This literature notes that power relations work to homogenize and ‘other’ “cultural and gender difference” in such a way that “cultures are imposed, invented, and transformed” (Zayzafoon, 2005: 2-3; also see Arat-Koç 2012).

In sum, feminist, orientalist, and neocolonial frameworks are evident in the media representation of Syrian refugees in Canada, reflecting views of Muslim men as security threats. Because men are depicted as more dominant and more of a risk than women, the rhetoric put forward is that men are not as vulnerable as women, indicating that they are less deserving of refugee status in Canada. Thus, the few isolated critical voices among journalists may celebrate Canadians' presumed "openness" to Syrian refugee resettlement while also increasingly cautioning Canadians to be watchful.

## **Conclusions**

Our thematic analysis covers a relatively large segment of the Canadian media content over 9 months (September 2015 till May 2016), in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis. The main conclusion is that the media both produce and reflect a mainstream and uncritical view that endorses neo-colonial, orientalist, neoliberal, anti-Islamic and patriarchal perspectives to both the refugees and the Canadian government and public. Indeed, Kamil El-Solaylee's call for a more critical approach by Canadian media is well taken.

The media both mirror and reinforce the government's and public's identity confusion in relation to the Syrian refugee issue. While media make soothing noises about the openness and generosity of Canadians, they also continue to depict refugees along an inaccurate and misleading continuum between being needy and lacking agency, and as a possible threat. The focus on public volunteerism in relation to refugee resettlement is commendable, but media reporting directly reflects, endorses and promotes the government's abdication of its responsibility through transferring social responsibility to private individuals and groups. The glorification of "Canadian values" directly feeds into the neoliberal conceptualization of individuals as makers of their own fortunes. This conclusion reveals the role of Canadian media as anything but an uncritical conduit for upholding dominant values and ideologies.

What we need to further investigate as the Syrian crisis unfolds on the

world stage are the real issues related to settlement and displacement. It is evident that there are still millions of people trying to migrate from Syria to a new home. It is necessary that as time passes the settlement of Syrian refugees in Canada be observed and documented, to report on the successes and shortcomings of Canada's refugee system and settlement services. These reports should focus not on what Canada perceives to be the settlement experience of Syrian refugees, but stories that come from Syrian refugees themselves.



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