



Brokering immigrant transnationalism: Remittances, family reunification, and private refugee sponsorship in neoliberal Canada

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journals.sagepub.com/home/csi**Emine Fidan Elcioglu**

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Abstract

Using the case study of Canada's private refugee sponsorship program, we show how neoliberalization heightens the power of non-immigrant civilians to broker immigrants' transnationalism. Private sponsors respond differently to two common and interrelated forms of refugee transnationalism in which they are structurally empowered to intervene. They encourage family reunification while discouraging remittances, although the former often depends on the fulfillment of the latter. Reflecting on these power imbalances, we classify private refugee sponsorship as part of a North American trend to devolve the management of noncitizens from state actors to ordinary citizens. We conclude by encouraging scholars of transnationalism to look *down* and investigate how non-immigrant private civilians in receiving countries increasingly shape newcomers' cross-border linkages. We also urge them to look *up* and attend to the broader neoliberal context empowering and structuring the behavior of citizen brokers.

Keywords

Family reunification, neoliberalism, refugees, remittances, transnationalism

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Resumen

A partir del estudio de caso del programa privado de patrocinio de refugiados de Canadá, se muestra cómo la neoliberalización aumenta el poder de los civiles no inmigrantes para negociar el transnacionalismo de los inmigrantes. Los patrocinadores privados responden de manera diferente a dos formas comunes e interrelacionadas de transnacionalismo de refugiados en las que están estructuralmente facultados para intervenir. Fomentan la reunificación familiar al tiempo que desalientan el envío de remesas, aunque la primera muchas veces depende del cumplimiento de la segunda. El análisis de estos desequilibrios de poder lleva a incluir el patrocinio privado de refugiados dentro de una tendencia norteamericana de delegar la gestión de los no ciudadanos de actores estatales a los ciudadanos comunes. Se concluye alentando a los investigadores del transnacionalismo a mirar 'hacia abajo' para estudiar cómo los civiles privados no inmigrantes en los países receptores dan forma cada vez más a los vínculos transfronterizos de los recién llegados. También se les invita a mirar 'hacia arriba' y prestar atención al contexto neoliberal más amplio que empodera y estructura el comportamiento de los ciudadanos que hacen de intermediarios.

Palabras clave

neoliberalismo, refugiados, remesas, reunificación familiar, transnacionalismo

Résumé

À partir de l'étude de cas du programme privé canadien de parrainage de réfugiés, nous montrons comment la néolibéralisation accroît le pouvoir des civils non immigrants de servir d'intermédiaires dans le transnationalisme des immigrants. Ces parrains privés apportent une réponse différente à deux formes communes et interdépendantes de transnationalisme des réfugiés dans lesquelles ils sont structurellement habilités à intervenir: ils encouragent le regroupement familial tout en décourageant les transferts de fonds, bien que le premier dépende souvent des seconds. L'examen de ces déséquilibres de pouvoir montre que le parrainage privé de réfugiés s'inscrit dans une tendance nord-américaine à déléguer la gestion des non-citoyens des acteurs étatiques aux citoyens ordinaires. Pour conclure, nous encourageons les spécialistes du transnationalisme à porter leur regard vers le bas pour étudier la façon dont les civils privés non immigrants dans les pays d'accueil définissent de plus en plus les liens transfrontaliers des nouveaux arrivants, et les invitons également à regarder vers le haut pour s'intéresser au contexte néolibéral plus général qui habilite et structure le comportement des citoyens servant d'intermédiaires.

Mots-clés

néolibéralisme, réfugiés, regroupement familial, transferts de fonds, transnationalisme

Introduction

In October 2021, a month after US troops withdrew from Afghanistan, President Biden launched an emergency initiative that allowed private Americans to sponsor Afghan

evacuees. A year later, ordinary Americans had helped resettle 600 Afghan and 30,000 Ukrainian refugees, and the US State Department stated its intention to make private sponsorship ‘an enduring element’ of US refugee policy (Montoya-Galvez, 2022; Watson and Taxin, 2022). Albeit unprecedented in the United States, this initiative was modeled after long-standing Canadian institutions: Canada’s private sponsorship of refugees (PSR) programs and the combined public–private blended visa office-referred (BVOR).

Unlike the government-assisted refugee (GAR) program, the PSR (in which sponsors select the refugees they help resettle¹) and BVOR (in which the government assigns refugees to sponsors) allow private citizens to take responsibility for their sponsored refugees during their first year in Canada. During the sponsorship year (and often longer), private sponsors financially support refugees either partially (BVOR) or completely (PSR). Sponsors also serve as newcomers’ main conduit for resources, including housing, transportation, healthcare, employment, language learning, and even, as we will show, maintaining cross-border ties with family members in the homeland.

While there has been much academic interest in Canada’s private resettlement programs (Labman and Cameron, 2020; Reynolds and Clark-Kazak, 2019), and particularly, private sponsors’ role as agents of resettlement (Elcioglu, 2021; Haugen et al., 2020; Lenard, 2019), we know less about how these sponsors shape newcomers’ transnational ties to their homelands. Migration scholars have shown that immigrants’ cross-border ties often hinge on the support of various actors, like hometown associations and governments (Waldinger, 2015).² We introduce another social actor: non-immigrant civilians in the hostland.

This study shows how Canadians who volunteer as private sponsors end up with discretionary power over the newcomers they help resettle. Drawing on interviews with sponsors ($n=23$) and representatives of sponsorship-overseeing social service organizations ($n=2$) as well as participant observation of an 8-week online course, we show how the private refugee sponsorship program allows non-immigrant civilians to broker refugees’ transnational practices. By transnationalism we mean ‘the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and country of settlement’ (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992: 1). Transnational practices can encompass many kinds of cross-border activities, including remittances (Duquette-Rury, 2020), transmission of information to facilitate chain migration (Kibria, 2011), and participation in homeland politics from abroad (Andrews, 2018).

In this study, we focus on two forms of transnationalism – remittances and preservation of cross-border ties with family. We show how newcomers rely on the discretion of their civilian sponsors for these practices. Specifically, this article illustrates how citizen sponsors can discourage ‘their’ refugees from sending remittances, believing that this practice thwarts newcomers’ assimilation. Yet, sponsors may also *facilitate* refugees’ cross-border ties when they agree to sponsor their charges’ loved ones.

Which transnational practices are encouraged or discouraged is shaped by sponsors’ conceptions of successful resettlement.³ While sponsors consider remittances a sign of refugees’ backward-looking (and unhealthy) orientation to a pre-Canadian past, family reunification is thought to signal refugees’ forward-looking (and healthy) orientation to a Canadian future.

That ordinary citizens can influence immigrant transnationalism has conceptual implications. First, it nuances a key framework in the sociology of migration – transnationalism – by troubling the assumption that cross-border linkages tend to be state- or immigrant-led. Second, by examining how sponsors navigate common transnational practices, we show how neoliberalization heightens the power that civilians in the host-land wield over refugees. We conclude by linking private resettlement to the broader trend in North America to devolve the management of noncitizens from the federal to the local level, and from state authorities to ordinary citizens.

The privatization of refugee resettlement

Governments normally control refugee admissions and settlement. However, for over 40 years, the Canadian government has also relied on private Canadian citizens and permanent residents for refugee settlement. In fact, the PSR and the BVOR, established in 1976 and 2013, respectively, have facilitated the resettlement of 48% of *all* Canadian refugees over the last four decades (Van Haren, 2021).

Private sponsorship originally supplemented government-assisted sponsorship, but over the past decade, the program has become the primary way that refugees can resettle in Canada (Labman, 2019). Government sponsorships were almost double the number of PSRs between 1995 and 2012. By 2019, however, the reverse was true (Van Haren, 2021). Canada intends to continue devolving refugee resettlement to private citizens. For the next 3 years, each year Canada will admit up to 23,550 refugees (45.9%) through the GAR program, 250 refugees (0.5%) through the public–private BVOR scheme, and 27,505 refugees (53.6%) through the PSR arrangement (IRCC, 2022).

In the absence of a coordinated system of material support and information, refugees sponsored through the PSR or BVOR programs are at the mercy of sponsors' capacity, resources, and knowledge (Elcioglu, 2021; Lenard, 2019), including problematic cultural assumptions they may have (Agrawal, 2018; Haugen et al., 2020; Kyriakides et al., 2018). We echo scholars who have emphasized the power discrepancy between sponsors and 'their' refugees. Sponsors often continue providing financial support beyond the year-long sponsorship period (Elcioglu, 2021; Lenard, 2019), which is invaluable in places like Ontario, where social assistance rates currently stand far below the actual cost of living (Chandler, 2021). However, it also means that responsibility for refugee welfare is transferred from the public to the private sphere, congruent with neoliberal ethos (Silvius, 2016).

By facilitating this shift, the government also effectively asks private citizens to individually overcome systemic challenges triggered by neoliberal rollbacks on social provisions (Elcioglu, 2021). Limited social housing means that sponsors must help newcomers find housing in an expensive private rental market (Oudshoorn et al., 2020). Sponsors may unwittingly foist bad housing and location choices on their refugees, who must depend on their sponsors' recommendations. Moreover, the reluctance of Canadian employers to recognize foreign credentials and work experience (Creese and Wiebe, 2012) and sponsors' preferring that 'their' refugees be employed and not on social assistance (Lenard, 2019), means sponsors may encourage refugees to accept deskilling survival jobs (Agrawal, 2018: 954). We argue that this context – where refugees are

structurally dependent on their sponsors for access to limited resources – also empowers the latter to influence the former’s homeland connections.

Neoliberalization and refugee transnationalism

The transnational framework has helped correct misleadingly unidirectional accounts of migration and it has done so by sensitizing scholars to immigrants’ and refugees’ cross-border activities and their importance for newcomer integration into host societies. For instance, transnational scholars have documented how families must negotiate being scattered across multiple countries because reunification is protracted, costly, and uncertain (Gabaccia, 2000). Remittances help maintain family ties, allowing senders to be ‘good’ family members to those left behind (Peter, 2010). Often, sending money is fueled by the hope of eventual family reunification (Huennekes, 2018), which, in turn, can facilitate immigrants’ economic adjustment to the receiving society (Bragg and Wong, 2016). Conversely, delays in bringing loved ones together can harm immigrants’ employment and wages in the interim (OECD, 2019), reducing household purchasing power and, concomitantly, access to social rights (Grace et al., 2017).

The transnational lens has also brought attention to the landscape of actors, beyond immigrants themselves, who broker newcomers’ ties to their homelands: sending and receiving states (Waldinger, 2015) and immigrant-led civil society organizations (Andrews, 2018). In this article, we introduce another set of actors – non-immigrant private citizens in the receiving society. Without any material incentives from the state, sponsors voluntarily take on the responsibility of hosting refugees in Canada. As they do so, they discourage certain transnational phenomena (remittances) while facilitating others (family reunification), even though the two are interrelated.

The large body of scholarship on transnationalism, however, has unfortunately neglected the relationship between immigrant transnationalism and neoliberalization, understood as an ‘always-incomplete’ process of ‘market-oriented, market-disciplinary, and market-making regulatory restructuring’ that iteratively destroys and creates infrastructures and norms (Peck et al., 2018: 7). This oversight is surprising given that ‘activists beyond borders’ were an empirical impetus for the transnationalism framework. These international advocacy networks bridged the North–South divide to wage campaigns against the ruthlessness of neoliberal globalization (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Waldinger and Shams, in press). In fact, early transnational scholars argued that neoliberal globalization gave rise to the very conditions that made this cross-border political mobilization possible. For instance, market-bolstering state interventions have helped make transnational corporations fixtures in the neoliberalized economy; yet, these corporations have also ‘inadvertently’ offered workers ‘shared targets’ against which to wage an international struggle (Evans, 2008: 288–299). In its original formulation, therefore, transnationalism was always tied to neoliberalizing processes. However, once adopted by migration scholars, transnationalism was largely stripped of discussions about how pro-market policies, tendencies, and institutions interact with newcomers’ cross-border activities.

Yet, transnational migration ‘remains profoundly connected to market expansion and rapid flows of investment into new geographic regions’ (Mitchell, 2016: 120), just as

immigration policies often dovetail with neoliberal programs (Binford, 2013; Mitchell, 2001). Indeed, a key instantiation of immigrant transnationalism – remittances – is best understood as a mitigating response to neoliberalization (Golash-Boza, 2015). To repay debts to international financial institutions, many global south nations have been forced to adopt structural adjustment policies, including privatization, trade liberalization, and reductions in social services. These policies have stunted local industries while reinforcing dependency on wealthier countries. Unable to subsist under these conditions, many in the global south rely on remittances from emigrants (Golash-Boza, 2015). As a result, remittances account for a substantial portion of gross domestic product in many sending countries; internationally, these transfers are valued at nearly \$600 billion (World Bank, 2021a, 2021b). War-torn places – from which many refugees hail – particularly need these foreign incomes.

Another example of immigrant transnationalism – family reunification efforts – is also related to neoliberalization. In Canada, provincial governments have severely retracted supports for families (Shields, 2004). Immigrants often rely on the presence of ‘extended’ family because neoliberalization has rendered economic survival impossible without labor market participation (Grace et al., 2017). Grandparents, though considered dependents, are needed for childcare so that parents can work outside the home, afford basic necessities, and try to meet the neoliberal ideal of ‘self-sufficiency’ (Bragg and Wong, 2016). However, the pro-market focus on the economic benefits of immigration has devalued family-class immigration and narrowed avenues for family reunification (Root et al., 2014). Thus, the exigencies of family separation and reunification, just like remittances, must be understood in relation to neoliberalization.

Besides challenging unidirectional accounts of immigration, the transnational lens has also provided a much-needed sociological correction to *homo economicus* characterizations of immigrants by showing how multiple actors shape newcomers’ ability to forge and maintain homeland ties. We use the case study of private refugee sponsorship to revisit and strengthen this conceptual framework in two ways. First, we demonstrate how, apart from states and immigrant-led civil society organizations, non-immigrant civilians in host societies can also broker newcomer transnationalism. Given the global tendency to devolve resettlement work, we predict that non-immigrant civilian brokers may increasingly become fixtures of immigrant transnationalism.

Second, this article recenters neoliberalism in the study of transnationalism. We show how a market-oriented zeitgeist, coupled with the resource scarcities that pro-market institutional arrangements produce, help explain sponsors’ ideas, actions, and structural empowerment. At the same time, we heed Peck et al.’s (2018) caveat that ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ is not a totalizing project but instead, an uneven, incomplete one that is in ‘contradictory and conflictual cohabitation with non-neoliberal others’ (p. 7). We found, for instance, that several sponsors, despite having no prior experience with immigration bureaucracy, took it upon themselves to meet the high costs and numerous hurdles of reuniting the families of their formerly sponsored refugees in Canada. Sponsors agreed to these ventures not knowing when or if their efforts would bear fruit and without any guarantee that sponsored family members would ‘contribute’ to the Canadian economy. In line with earlier transnationalism scholarship, we thus show how cross-border ties can simultaneously reinforce and challenge processes of neoliberalization.

Methods

This article draws on 25 in-depth interviews between February and May 2020 and participant observation of an 8-week online course between January and March 2021. Recruited through snowballing, 23 of the interviews were with sponsors who had participated in private or BVOR sponsorship in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Kingston, Ontario.

Most sponsorships in Canada occur under the aegis of sponsorship agreement holders (SAHs) (Van Haren, 2021: Table 3).⁴ SAHs are nonprofit social service organizations. Their main function is to submit sponsorship applications to the government on behalf of prospective sponsors; SAHs then assume legal liability for the sponsors and refugees under their care (RSTP, n.d.). In our study, two of the 25 interviewees were key informants – the directors of an SAH overseeing more than half of the respondents.

To explore geographic variation, we recruited sponsors in Kingston, a mid-sized city with approximately 120,000 people, of which 13% are foreign-born, and the GTA, a region of nearly 6,000,000 residents, of which 46% are foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2016a, 2016b). Predictably, Kingston has far fewer immigrant-directed resources than Toronto. However, despite these differences, sponsors from both cities had remarkably similar understandings. Moreover, being mostly white, middle-class, and elderly, respondents resembled the general population of private refugee sponsors (Macklin et al., 2018).

Most (96%) sponsors identified as white, and most were women (65%). Although respondents' ages ranged from 32 to 78 years old, the average age was 62. Respondents reported middle-class incomes.⁵ Sponsors had white-collar professional backgrounds. Most (87%) were homeowners. Nearly three-quarters of the sample were married (74%) and living in two-person households.

Unlike past scholarship about hostland civil society actors mediating refugees' experiences (Landolt and Goldring, 2010; Riaño-Alcalá and Goldring, 2014), respondents in this study were not social justice or community activists. In fact, for the vast majority of respondents, sponsorship marked a new level of civic engagement and their first sustained contact with racialized, working-class newcomers. Most respondents (65%) had become sponsors in 2015 and 2016, in support of the Liberal Party's commitment to resettle more Syrian refugees than Canada ever had before. In most cases, respondents were novices to sponsorship.

Our study is informed by the philosophy that unique cases offer opportunities to challenge and extend theory. Even a single case that does not align with extant theory creates an opening to reconstruct that theory so that it 'absorb[s] the anomaly' (Burawoy, 2021: 130). In our case, that sponsors tried to influence refugees' cross-border activities provided the opportunity to reconceptualize transnationalism by broadening the scope of actors and social forces that can influence this process.

Nonetheless, we used additional data sources to determine whether our findings were being echoed at higher institutional levels. This study also draws on participant observation of an online course facilitated by a government-funded national organization that trains prospective sponsors, a resource that SAHs and sponsors take as guidelines for how to manage refugees. The free 8-week course ran between January and March 2021

and was open to the public. It covered many subjects, including budgeting settlement costs. The modules are created by training organization, which all course facilitators, regardless of positionality, present in a uniform manner. As an enrolled student, one of the authors (Elcioglu) was able to access the course curriculum.

Data for this article do not include refugees' perspectives. Despite their attempts to intervene, therefore, sponsors may not have been always successful in changing refugees' behaviors. However, what is sociologically significant is that sponsors *attempted* to intervene at all, reflecting the extent to which private resettlement program structurally empowers sponsors to shape refugees' private, cross-border lives.

Data about sponsors were garnered through semi-structured interviews. Following Emerson et al. (1995), the transcribed interviews were open-coded to identify themes related to what sponsors found challenging about their work and how they made sense of refugees' integration processes. Afterwards, responses were focused-coded. Once we identified the interviewees' biggest difficulties, we categorized the sources that sponsors attributed to these challenges and their proposed solutions. The next section explores two recurring patterns in the codes, namely, concerns around how family separation and remittances impacted refugee integration.

Sponsors facilitating immigrants' here–there connections: family reunification

Claire: making decisions 'I'm not qualified to make'

After a successful career at a large bank in Toronto, Claire, a 69-year-old white woman, retired to Kingston and became a sponsor. Like many other sponsors, she was mobilized by a photo of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach in 2015. Claire organized a sponsoring group of friends. With the help of a local SAH, they decided to resettle a young Syrian family of four, the Rahmans, to Canada.

Shortly after the sponsorship year was over, the Rahmans approached Claire about helping their relatives, the Khaleds, come to Canada. When Claire learned about the Khaleds, they were not yet registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as convention refugees. 'I think there's potentially still some risk that I could be bringing in somebody who is not really worth the space, given the limited number of spaces that are available', Claire reflected. To mitigate this risk, she undertook her own vetting process:

So [I was] asking [the Rahmans] a lot of information about who [the Khaleds] are and trying to get some sense about what I'm going to be going through as a sponsor once they get here, assuming they eventually get here. [. . .] Like, who are these people and how are they going to fit into our culture?

Claire was aware that she was not 'trained' to do this kind of vetting, but she felt that she could rely on her intuition. If the Khaleds supported Bashar Al-Assad's regime and lived in relative comfort but wondered 'wouldn't it be fun to go [live] somewhere else', then Claire would not want to bring them to Canada. If the family seemed truly 'in need'

and Claire felt they were motivated to ‘integrate’ and ‘make a contribution to Canada’, then they were good sponsorship candidates.

Claire knew that the criteria she used to determine whether the Khaleds were ‘worth the space’ was subjective and potentially contradictory. She wanted to help those ‘in need’, yet the most vulnerable were not necessarily able to ‘make contributions’ to Canada. When she decided to sponsor the Rahmans, Claire’s acquaintances had been critical. As university-educated professionals in Damascus, the husband and wife seemed too well-to-do to be ‘genuine’ refugees:

[My acquaintances told me] ‘you should be looking for people who are completely and totally destitute, who have some horrifying situation’. I said that’s probably true and we certainly need to try and help those people. But I don’t know who those people are. And [. . .] why is this family less in need than some other family? I don’t know how you make that decision. I’m not qualified for that. I don’t *want* to make that decision.

Claire explained it was easier to trust others to identify deserving refugees. She did sponsor the Rahmans in 2016, and a few years later, the Khaleds.

In early 2020, the Rahmans approached her again, this time to sponsor Mrs Rahman’s brother and his family, who had fled Syria for Qatar. Mrs Rahman’s brother’s work contract – and with it, his family’s legal right to stay in Qatar – was set to expire in a year’s time. ‘In theory, they don’t have a country to go back to. Does that mean they should not be considered refugees?’ Claire wondered.

Though Claire was happy to have helped reunite two families in Canada, she refused the Rahmans’ request. She had already sponsored another, unrelated Syrian family and had shouldered a lot of the work resettling all three families. She was tired. Also, the SAH too taxed to help her with the sponsorship application paperwork for another family. Nonetheless, Claire shared her insights with Grace, an acquaintance who also wanted to bring over a loved one of a refugee she had previously sponsored.

Grace: ‘mothering’ a young refugee

Grace, a university-educated 68-year-old white woman, had, like Claire, seen sponsorship as a meaningful way to navigate retirement. ‘I mean some people are totally happy staying at home and playing with their cats. But I’m not’, Grace explained. ‘So, [sponsorship is] meeting my needs as much as it’s meeting [the refugees]’. While raising her kids, she worked in early education and then with young pregnant women at a prevention program. There she found her calling. ‘I had *such* a meaningful job’. However, after two decades, Grace was laid off. ‘Then, suddenly, I didn’t have anything’, she recalled. When, in 2015, the Trudeau government invited Canadians to do their part in Operation Syrian Refugees, Grace jumped at the opportunity.

With five other women, Grace sponsored a large multigenerational family of subsistence farmers from a rural town in Syria. As a BVOR unnamed sponsorship, the family was referred to Grace’s group by the Canadian government. One of the children, 15-year-old Reema, was pregnant with her first child. Grace felt she was well-positioned to help her. She accompanied the young mother-to-be to her prenatal appointments, enrolled her

in school, and helped her with homework. She felt like she was ‘mothering’ Reema. After the baby was born, Grace continued to visit often, helping Reema adjust to motherhood. Meanwhile, Reema’s husband still lived in Lebanon. Reema wanted her husband to be with them and turned to Grace for help.

Grace approached former co-sponsors about forming a sponsorship group again. ‘It was very clearly stated by the [Canadian] government that we’re looking to bring [whole] families [rather than young men]’ Grace explained. But she was still going to give it a shot because she cared for Reema. ‘It’s a really interesting kind of warmth that we feel towards each other’, the sponsor reflected. ‘And that’s been really nice’.

Henri: ‘when you’re off welfare, we’ll consider sponsoring your family’

Like Claire and Grace, Henri, a 70-year-old pensioner, also brokered refugees’ access to family reunification. In the early 2000s, his Toronto-based church began participating in private sponsorship. As chair of the church’s refugee committee, Henri helped oversee the resettlement of a new family every 2 years. When interest in sponsorship soared in 2015, Henri’s church committee began overseeing outside sponsor groups, who undertook most resettlement tasks. All that Henri’s committee had to do was manage the 25 groups’ finances.

The church’s large-scale initiative was feasible because the newcomers it resettled already had UNHCR-conferred refugee status, and the Canadian government did not impose a ceiling on such applications. In the past, Henri’s church had avoided ‘named sponsorship’ of those without UNHCR-approved refugee status. Because they were subject to a more stringent government vetting process, named sponsorships had unpredictable timelines and outcomes. For these reasons, the SAH overseeing Henri’s church wished to avoid ‘wasting’ resources on cases that seemed unlikely to succeed.

However, former refugees were increasingly approaching Henri to settle their loved ones in Canada. The church’s SAH already had a 3-year waitlist for named sponsorship applications. Such ‘echo’ sponsorships, where one resettlement subsequently triggers the sponsorship of additional family members, are not uncommon (Hyndman et al., 2021). Henri felt authorized to adjudicate these requests. ‘One of the young daughters of our [sponsored] family said, “I’m engaged to my cousin. Will you sponsor him?” I said, “You know what? When you guys are off social welfare, we’ll consider it”’. In another instance, Henri encouraged an ‘echo request’, surmising that ‘the odds are the brother and his family are also going to be hardworking’ just like their previously sponsored relatives. The cultural imperative of unaided individualism guided Henri’s decisions about which reunification requests to accept:

Well, I look at it in two ways: as a sponsor and as a taxpayer. We’ve got people that we are paying our taxes to support [via] welfare programs. ‘Go get a job, and then we’ll look at it [consider your request]’. As a sponsor, I don’t want to bring another person [to Canada] who’s going to end up [starting] a family, and [require] \$500 a month [of government aid] for [their] children. ‘If this is what you want to do, you can always go back’.

Grace, Claire, and Henri found sponsorship to be a labor-intensive but meaningful endeavor that fostered long-lasting relationships between sponsors and refugees. Seeing family reunification as a worthwhile form of transnationalism, Claire and Grace went to great lengths to facilitate this cross-border phenomenon. The idea that loved ones would suffer separation indefinitely inspired sponsor resistance to the state's narrow definition of family. That former sponsors sometimes agreed to echo requests – despite the unpredictable outcome of named sponsorship applications and the shortage of resources and guidance from the government – is remarkable.

Yet, it was precisely this dearth of resources that encouraged sponsors to adopt their own arbitrary systems of adjudication. Refugees' access to loved ones ultimately hinged on their former sponsors' individual inclinations and capacities. Henri relied on an ideal of self-reliance to decide which families to help. Claire similarly 'vetted' the family she was asked to sponsor, preferring to resettle people with a particular class background and cultural orientation. After three sponsorships, however, Claire did not have the energy to sponsor again, despite the pleas of her former charges. Meanwhile, Grace was energized by her strong maternal feelings toward Reema. Absent this motherly affection, however, it is unclear whether Grace would have committed to reuniting the young family.

Sponsors impeding transnationalism: discouraging remittances

Kate: 'we can't give money away'

That remittances constituted a 'problem' stemming from the fiscal pressures that sponsors faced. On paper, the public-private BVOR scheme required sponsors to furnish only half the necessary financial support, the government providing the rest. However, sponsors realized that government assistance was calibrated to outdated welfare rates, not the actual cost of living. One sponsoring group thus decided to support their charges with more than the 50% split that was required of them. Later, they resolved to continue giving financial assistance for 6 additional months past the legally contracted sponsorship year. This way, even if refugees remained unemployed a year after arriving in Canada, they did not fall off a 'financial cliff' when the sponsorship period ended. However, sponsors still worried about their refugees' expenditures. Some sponsors, like Kate, felt justified to discourage remittances precisely because they came out of the funds the committee had privately raised.

Kate, a 43-year-old white woman, joined a sponsorship group through a church. The daughter of a development worker, Kate had wondered what privileged Canadians like her could do to help those in 'other' places, even before the Syrian refugee crisis. As a television producer and mother of two, she had little spare time. But when Kurdi's death made Canadian headlines, Kate quickly formed a group with likeminded people to sponsor a family from Syria.

After the sponsorship year ended, Kate decided that she wanted to help resettle a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) refugee. 'I don't understand homophobia!' she explained. John, the young man with whom Kate's group was matched, had sought asylum from Kenya. He had fled Uganda where he was

persecuted for his sexual orientation. Despite being HIV positive, John was in ‘excellent health’. He was single, without dependents, and spoke English, so his sponsors hoped he could achieve financial independence relatively quickly. But he did not. The main obstacle, it seemed to Kate, was his tendency to send money home.

We just had to bail him out three days ago even though he has been here a year and a half. But he had minus thirty-seven dollars in his bank account and his rent was due. He is a very emotional person and he had a traumatic [life], you know, because he was gay. He had been ostracized by his family and then orphaned. [. . .] And he has a younger brother that he feels responsible for. So, he kept sending all of his money home [to his brother]. I think in some way he was trying to redeem himself in the eyes of his family by sending money home. I’ve talked to him about it.

Kate empathized with John’s predicament. To his family and friends, he was ‘so lucky’. Naturally, they would turn to him for money. Meanwhile, John felt a ‘tremendous amount of guilt’ about the disparity between his circumstances in Canada and those of the people he left behind. Refusing to send money could not be easy for John, Kate conceded. ‘But you have to. We can’t give money away’. After all, his sponsors had ‘fund-raised’ that money specifically for him. They confronted him with this fact in the many ‘heart-to-hearts’ they had with him.

Interestingly, it was not the prospect of John’s remittances depleting sponsorship funds that concerned his sponsors; it was the fact that John was remitting these funds at all. The church that facilitated their sponsorship was in a highly affluent Toronto neighborhood; fundraising had been so successful that there were spare funds left over from the first sponsorship (of the Syrian family) to help resettle a second refugee (John). What seemed to bother the sponsors was that their investment was leaving Canada.

Joshua: remittances ‘delay’ settlement

To sponsors (as well as others in the resettlement community), remittances hampered immigrant integration both materially and psychologically. In material terms, remittances affected a newcomer’s ability to meet household expenses. Some sponsors also believed remittances oriented refugees to the ‘there and then’ instead of the ‘here and now’. Family reunification represented to the sponsors a refugee’s future orientation exclusively to Canada, whereas remittances indicated a refugee’s backward-looking orientation to the past.

Joshua, a pastor, was one sponsor who held this belief. Joshua helped resettle the Haddads, a family of farmers from a village just outside of Aleppo. They were forced to leave their elderly parents behind in Syria, where ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) confiscated their livelihood. Shortly after arriving in Canada, the Haddads started sending money to them. Because he spoke Arabic fluently, Joshua understood the parents were ‘living very, very close to the edge’. Nonetheless, to Joshua, remittances were impeding the Haddads’ integration into their new homeland. ‘Their needs here to settle – get the language, get education, get employment – have been delayed partially through

sending a lot of money back', he explained. Whenever he spoke with the family, he tried to dissuade the practice.

Patrick: 'if the donors find out, it'll hurt future fundraising'

After participating in five sponsorships, Patrick, a white 74-year-old former priest and educator, had grown accustomed to remittances. 'I understand why they would want to do this', he explained. 'It's normal. It's what people who, say, are coming [to Canada] from the Philippines to be nannies do: they send money back home'. At the same time, however, privately resettled refugees were not in the same boat as migrant nannies – unlike the latter, the former relied on donations from Canadians. 'Donors' would not be pleased that money earmarked for settlement needs *here* was in fact being sent overseas. Remittances risked 'destroying trust' and jeopardizing future fundraising efforts. As sponsors, therefore, 'you've got to hold the line'.

This was easier said than done. Patrick recalled how he and his co-sponsors had a 'big conflict' when they learned that their charges, the Salmans, a family of four, were sending money to relatives in Iraq. Some wanted to give the family even more money to support kin, while others wanted to discourage remittances during the official sponsorship period. Eventually, after a 'testy' discussion with the Salmans, the family agreed to stop sending money overseas. In another instance, Patrick and his colleagues learned that the Southeast Asian family of six that they had sponsored were living extremely frugally to remit money. For example, the home that sponsors had arranged for the family of six was in fact occupied by a dozen relatives. It was clear that remittances were an extension of the family's cultural ethos of kin support. But, once again, the sponsors attempted to stop this practice.

In both these instances, Patrick and his co-sponsors relied on their SAH to 'hold the line'. 'The SAH says, "Look, here are the rules. If you get into problems, we're the cop"', Patrick explained. The SAH representative would be present during these 'difficult' conversations, helping sponsors explain to their charges the 'rules' about remittances.

Institutional support for citizen brokering

Kate, Joshua, and Patrick's efforts to discourage remittances were institutionally supported. Many respondents first became aware of the 'problem' of remittances through online tutorials prepared by a national, government-funded sponsor training organization. The trainers encouraged sponsors to teach refugees about 'budgeting', including the necessity of curbing remittances. Separately, the organization characterized the idea that recently arrived refugees would have the finances to support family back in the homeland as a common 'myth'. Addressing refugees directly, the website emphasized that their sponsor-donated funds were exclusively reserved for living costs in Canada.

SAHs also discouraged remittances. 'That's a big thing that they grill into you', Kate explained. '[The sponsors] have to tell [the refugees] that they cannot send money home [because] if you send all your money [there], you won't have any money here'. Her SAH's handbook reinforced this approach. The high cost of living made remittances

prohibitive, it stated, and for this reason, sponsors could not be expected to ‘fund’ overseas families of their charges.

Meanwhile, others, like Patrick, relied on their SAH for hands-on brokering of newcomers’ transnationalism. When his group quibbled with the Salmans over their remittances, Patrick called on Andrew, a long-time SAH director, to intervene.

If sponsors were not vigilant, Andrew declared, sponsorship funds could ‘all flush home’, leaving refugees in financially precarious circumstances. Andrew had many cautionary tales about remittances. One family had sold all their sponsor-donated furniture; other refugees had participated in petty crime. A particularly trying case involved a young mother of three, who, under pressure from her family, engaged in sex work to wire money. According to Andrew, refugees were *always* worse off when they remitted. The PSR program’s goal was not to ‘save’ everyone. Rather, it was to help people *here*, so that they could ‘flower in the Canadian mosaic’.

Remittances constituted the Achilles heel of the PSR program. When Justin Trudeau announced Operation Syrian Refugees, ‘a whole lot of people thought he was nuts and were very provoked’, Andrew explained. If sponsorship funds were allowed to ‘flush’ abroad, the political right would have the fodder to dismantle the program, while pursuing other restrictive immigration policies.

But how did one get a ‘handle’ on remittances? Within the first month after arrival, Andrew explained, sponsors should determine their charges’ overseas familial obligations. Even regular visits to refugees’ homes could ‘tip [sponsors] off to what’s going on’. Unlike sponsors, Andrew was fully aware of how family separation could foster remittances.

If the [sponsor] group only has enough cash to pull off a family of four and [the mother and father] both have parents [living abroad], at some point they’re going to want to come [to Canada]. [. . .] So, if you’re not willing to sponsor them all [i.e. the family of four and each set of grandparents], [your refugees] will start sending money home.

Discussion

Although remittances allow immigrants to maintain family ties and are fueled by the hope of eventual family reunification (Huennekes, 2018), our study finds that sponsors interpret these two forms of transnationalism as separate and opposite. This bifurcated thinking originates from the imperatives of neoliberalization. Blaming welfare state spending for increasing national debt, governments, like that of Ontario, have sought to curb social provisions, including basic supports for immigrants and their families (Shields, 2004). At the same time, policymakers have progressively cast family-class immigrants and ‘dependents’ as having little economic value – and therefore distinct from their more desirable ‘economic-class’ counterparts. This understanding has led to the introduction of more eligibility restrictions for family-class and dependent categories, thereby narrowing official channels for family reunification (Root et al., 2014).

As a result, the burden of bringing kin over has shifted to private refugee sponsorship. Indeed, one national survey of 530 sponsors supporting Syrian refugees, found that over half had had been subsequently asked to assist in family reunification (Macklin et al.,

2018). Frequently, interpersonal contact with refugees allows sponsors to see family reunification as a worthwhile pursuit – contrary to the dictates of neoliberalism. However, responsabilizing sponsors in this way means that the reunion of families depends on volunteers' individual proclivities and capacities.

Sponsors feel more conflicted about remittances, which are also linked to neoliberal processes. Arguably, sponsor trainings that taught about the 'problem' of remittances were organized with a realist awareness of the fiscal pressures that both refugees and their sponsors face: a market saturated with low-wage jobs (PEPSO, 2013) that are still out of reach for newcomers with foreign credentials (Creese and Wiebe, 2012). This, paired with an inadequate social safety net, makes refugees' economic integration a challenge.

Rather than problematizing these structural pressures, however, sponsors and institutional actors in the resettlement community problematized what they could manage: refugees' budgets. Remittances became a key point of intervention. As the financial responsibility of refugees devolved from the state to civil society, private sponsors coped by deterring remittances. Thus, brokering refugees' transnationalism was a way for private sponsors to mitigate neoliberalism's effects.

Conclusion

For decades, scholars and advocates of sponsorship have noted the inadequacy of resources and training geared toward Canadian sponsors of refugees. However, we find a larger, structural problem. The retraction of the welfare state, the subjugation of newcomers to the bottom rungs of the labor market, the false decoupling of 'economic' and 'family-class' immigration along with the preference of the former to the latter, and the responsabilization of civil society for newcomers' resettlement constitute the backdrop of sponsors' actions. As a result, private sponsors respond differently to two common and interrelated forms of immigrant transnationalism in which they are structurally empowered to intervene. They *encourage family reunification* while *discouraging remittances*, although the former often depends on the fulfillment of the latter.

We thus encourage scholars of transnationalism to look *down* and investigate how non-immigrant private civilians in receiving countries shape newcomers' cross-border linkages. We also urge them to look *up* and attend to the broader neoliberal context structuring the behavior of citizen brokers. This invitation is in line with the original intent of the transnationalism framework: namely, to (1) document seemingly unremarkable everyday behaviors that are remarkable for transcending borders, and (2) understand these dynamics in relation to processes of neoliberalization.

Future studies might continue to explore how states have devolved the management of their foreign-born populations to local actors, and the inclusionary and exclusionary consequences of such subnational jurisdictions (Marrow, 2009). For instance, the privatization of healthcare has burdened hospital administrators to distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' immigrants while distributing services (Horton, 2004). Even in Canada's public medical insurance system, healthcare workers rely on individual discretion and narratives about deservingness to determine when and how to extend healthcare to precarious noncitizens (Landolt, 2022). Often, these categories of moral worth are

based on neoliberal standards of individual responsibility and self-discipline – the same logics that private refugee sponsors use.

Relatedly, our findings also problematize how scholars conceptualize Canada in relation to the United States. Bloemraad (2006) shows that in the absence of an interventionist state, the work of US settlement is largely left to private, nonprofit actors, thereby producing more variation in the quality of immigrant-directed services, and consequently, more inequality. Contrastingly, Canada is understood to have a more centralized, government-run resettlement process and, therefore, more uniform service provision to newcomers. Yet, we show the centrality of private civilians in refugee resettlement and what is arguably a trend toward the same model of devolved and privatized governance of noncitizens in both Canada and the United States, a phenomenon that necessitates critical study. This article is one step in that direction.

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Notes

1. Ultimately, however, the decision to accept a refugee's application rests with Canadian visa officers. Nonetheless, this prerogative allows private citizens significant input on the scale and composition of Canada's refugee admissions.
2. In this article, we use the terms 'refugee', 'immigrant', and 'newcomer' interchangeably. This blurred terminology heeds FitzGerald and Arar's (2018) call to problematize the seemingly self-evident distinctions between these categories.
3. Family reunification may seem like a form of de-transnationalization. However, it oftentimes triggers chain migration that transcends a nuclear family to include others from the home community (Hyndman et al., 2021).
4. Canadians who are not backed by an SAH can support refugees through a 'Group of Five' sponsorship, requiring five members, or as part of an organization acting as a 'Community Sponsor'. However, they can only apply to resettle individuals who have already been designated refugees by the UNHCR. Meanwhile, applying through an SAH gives sponsors the chance to resettle people without official refugee status.
5. In Toronto, middle-income households earned between \$80,000 and \$214,000 CAD in 2019 (Statistics Canada, 2021). All but one Toronto-based respondent was in this bracket. Although income data about Kingston are also dated to be relevant (Statistics Canada, 2017), we do know that middle-income households in Ontario earned between \$76,000 and \$204,000 CAD (Statistics Canada, 2021). All Kingstonian respondents fell into this income bracket.

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