

# REFUGEES ARE GOOD FOR CANADA

The social and economic  
benefits of welcoming people  
forced to flee

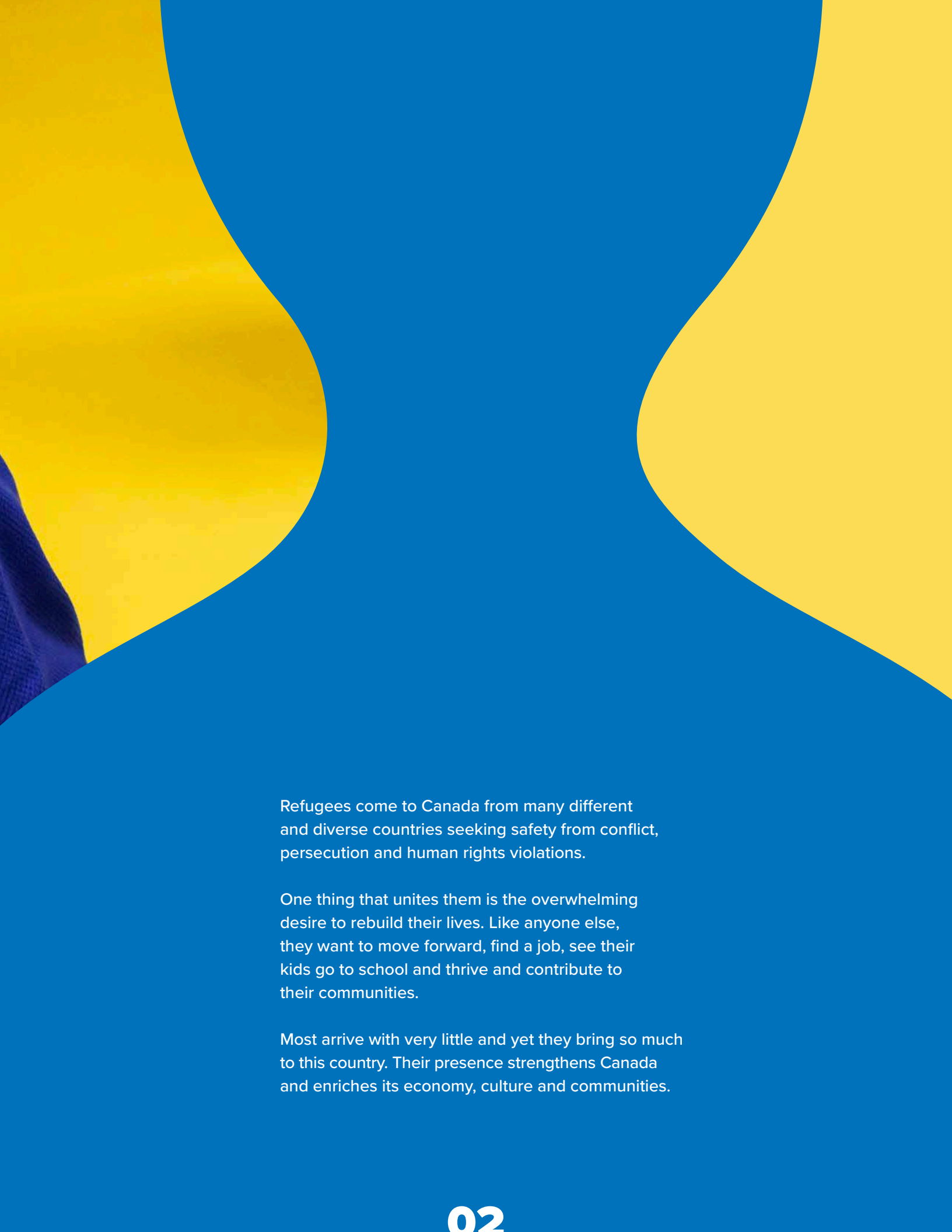


**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



## **NIGARA SHAHEEN**

*Commitment and perseverance defined Nigara Shaheen's path as a two-time refugee Olympian. Now resettled in Canada, she brings that same dedication to her new home, helping other people forced to flee succeed.*



Refugees come to Canada from many different and diverse countries seeking safety from conflict, persecution and human rights violations.

One thing that unites them is the overwhelming desire to rebuild their lives. Like anyone else, they want to move forward, find a job, see their kids go to school and thrive and contribute to their communities.

Most arrive with very little and yet they bring so much to this country. Their presence strengthens Canada and enriches its economy, culture and communities.

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# WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

Using data from Statistics Canada along with other sources, UNHCR Canada has compiled a glimpse of refugee integration in Canada – employment, earnings, occupations and education. Here's what it shows:


- **Refugees strengthen Canada's workforce**  
They are twice as likely as Canadian-born workers to be employed in manufacturing and utilities, and a larger percentage work in health and skilled trades.
- **Refugees arrive ready to work**  
The majority arrive in their prime working years. This helps balance Canada's aging population and supports long-term economic sustainability.
- **Refugee incomes rise steadily**  
In ten years since arriving, refugee median employment earnings grow by 31.5 per cent.
- **Refugees are committed to Canada**  
More than 80 per cent choose to become Canadian citizens within ten years of arrival, reflecting a profound desire to participate fully in the country's civic and democratic life.



**A note about the data:**

*This study uses the term refugee to describe persons: 1) who were admitted to Canada as permanent residents (landed immigrants) through one of Canada's refugee resettlement programs; or 2) were recognized as refugees in Canada and were subsequently granted permanent resident status in Canada.*

*The study surveys the most recent data and research available to provide a glimpse in the lives and achievements of the 1.5 million refugees who arrived in Canada since 1980. Much of the information is based on an analysis of the 2021 Census results. UNHCR is grateful for the assistance of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's Research and Evaluation Branch and to Statistics Canada for providing the source data on which the study is based. This does not constitute an endorsement by these departments of this product.*



The stats show the gains refugees have made in this country from coast to coast to coast. It also speaks to the incredible potential refugees possess when Canada offers safety to those who flee.

After escaping war or persecution, it is not easy to restart your life in a country like Canada. Especially when you arrive with few possessions and may not speak the local language. Given the chance to establish themselves, refugees actively contribute to Canadian society – working, studying, starting businesses and participating in civic life. And that benefits everyone.

This is largely thanks to their own perseverance and determination. However, this does not happen in a vacuum. We must also acknowledge the important role of governments, municipalities, businesses, schools and civil society in offering opportunities for refugees to find success.



# COMING TO CANADA

## A strong tradition of welcoming refugees

In 1972, Ugandan President Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of tens of thousands of South Asians from his country. Canada responded swiftly and compassionately to this humanitarian crisis. Within 90 days, over 7,000 Ugandan Asian refugees were resettled in Canada. Immigration officers were dispatched to Kampala to process applications and charter flights began arriving in Montreal. Refugees were welcomed at CFB Longue-Pointe and quickly integrated into communities across the country – from Toronto and Ottawa to Vancouver and Halifax. This historic resettlement effort not only saved lives but also laid the foundation for vibrant communities that continue to enrich Canada today.

For decades, through changing governments and times, Canada has opened its doors to people fleeing war, violence and persecution in such situations. Whether it was Hungarians in 1956, Asian Ugandans in the 1970s, the Indochinese refugee movement in the 1980s, or more recently, Syrians, Afghans and Ukrainians – Canada has remained a safe haven for refugees, offering hope and a fresh start.

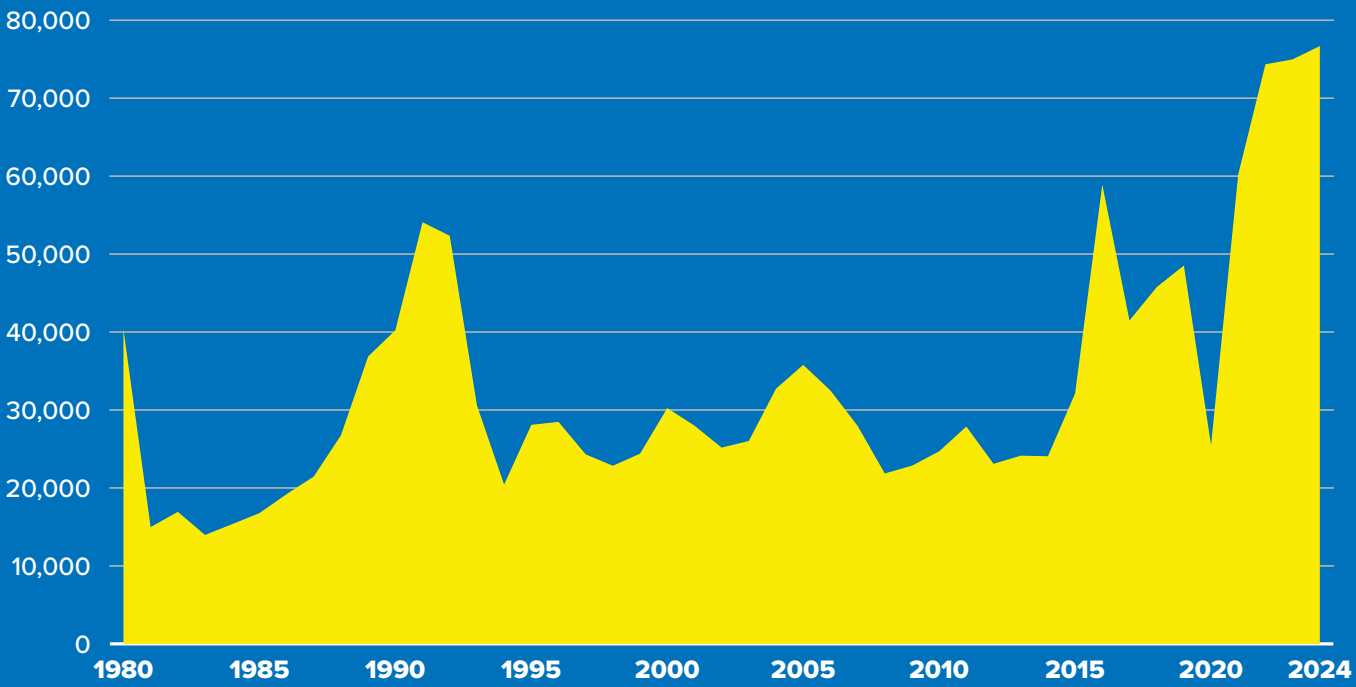
[READ MORE HERE](#)

# Between 1980 and 2024, Canada has welcomed approximately 1.5 million refugees.

This includes those recognized as refugees in Canada or resettled from overseas. There are two ways refugees come to Canada. They may claim asylum at a border or inside Canada and then be determined as refugees. They may also

be selected overseas for one of Canada’s resettlement programs: the Government-Assisted Refugee program, the Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, or the Blended Visa Office-Referred program.

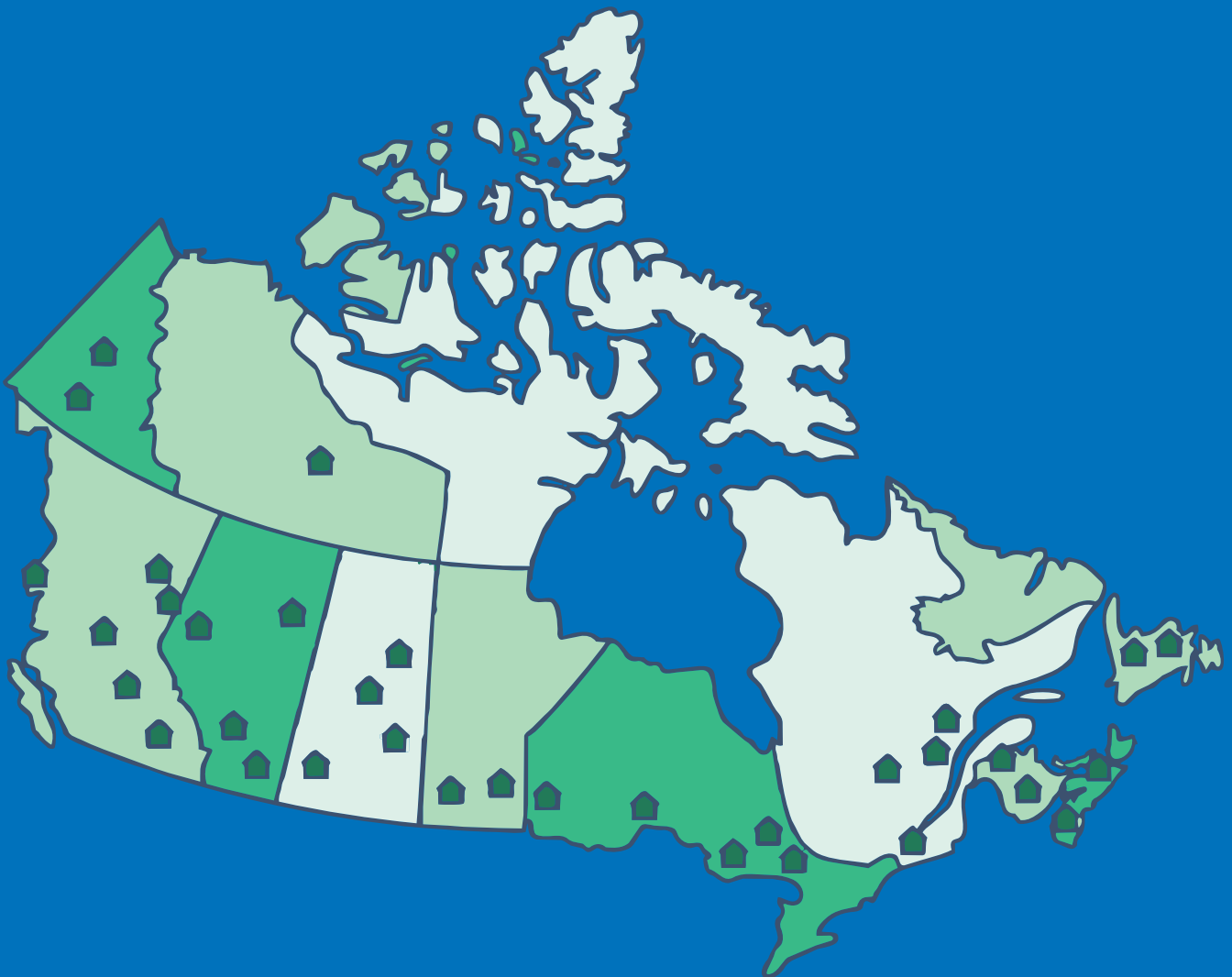
## Refugees and protected persons totals | 1980-2024



**Source:** Adapted from Annual Report to Parliament 2019 – 2024 and Statistics Canada, 2018 IRCC Permanent Residents Database in Cédric de Chardon, “An Overview of Economic Outcomes and Contributions to Refugees: Towards an Impact Story,” Canadian Council for Refugees Fall Consultation, 27 November 2018, slide 3.

## From coast to coast to coast

Refugees have become a valued part of communities across Canada – from Whitehorse in the Yukon to St. John's, Newfoundland and Victoria, British Columbia.





# SUPPORTING CANADA'S ECONOMY

The following section explores how refugees contribute to Canada's economy through employment and financial growth.

But first, let's meet three entrepreneurs:



# Espérance Tabisha

fled conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and spent years in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, where she taught herself to sew and built a small fashion business. After resettling in Cambridge, Ontario, she faced the challenge of restarting her career in a new country. Drawing on her skills and determination, she launched Esperanza Fashion & Design, a brand that blends African and Western styles. Espérance's journey shows how refugees overcome barriers to employment through creativity, perseverance and a drive to contribute to their new communities.

**FROM PEOPLE ALL  
OVER THE CAMP,  
I WAS THE ONLY  
REFUGEE WHO HAD  
A BUSINESS ONLINE!**

**- ESPÉRANCE TABISHA**

[\*\*READ HER STORY HERE\*\*](#)

# Ayda Alnoofoori

arrived in Ottawa in 2015 with her two daughters after fleeing Syria and spending three years in Lebanon. With a passion for food and a desire to help other refugee women integrate, Ayda co-founded Yasmin Syrian Cooking, a catering business that specializes in Syrian cuisine and employs refugee women. Operating from a church kitchen, Yasmin quickly built a client base that included NGOs, corporations and families. Even during the pandemic, the team adapted by preparing hundreds of meals weekly for local food centres. Yasmin not only provides income and community for its cooks, but also introduces Canadians to the rich culinary traditions of Syria.

**FOOD IS A VERY  
IMPORTANT ASPECT  
OF CULTURE. WHEN  
YOU WANT TO  
CONNECT SOCIALLY,  
YOU GATHER OVER  
FOOD.**

- AYDA ALNOOFOORI

[READ HER STORY HERE](#)





# Tareq Hadhad

arrived in Canada in 2015 after fleeing war in Syria with his family. “I arrived here with nothing,” Tareq said. “Just with lots of hope for the future.” Settling in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, he began making chocolates in the family’s home kitchen, reviving a family business lost to conflict. From these humble beginnings, Peace by Chocolate grew into a nationally recognized business that creates jobs and supports community initiatives. Tareq’s journey illustrates how refugees, even when starting with limited resources, steadily improve their earnings and contribute to Canada’s economy through resilience, entrepreneurship and hard work.

**WITHOUT PEACE I  
WOULD NOT HAVE  
BEEN ABLE TO  
RESTART MY LIFE  
HERE IN CANADA,  
OR HAVE MY  
FAMILY TO COME  
HERE, START  
A BUSINESS.**

**- TAREQ HADHAD**

[READ HIS STORY HERE](#)

# SEEKING EMPLOYMENT

## Refugees are employed at rates comparable to Canadian-born workers

Year on year, refugees' employment consistently grows. For those that arrived in Canada before 2010, their unemployment rate is almost the same as that of Canadian-born citizens (10 per cent vs 8 per cent), a clear indication of successful integration.

Refugees have repeatedly shown initiative to earn a living, whether it be by starting small businesses or being self-employed. In both instances, refugees contribute to their communities by paying taxes, contributing to the workforce and providing vital goods and services.

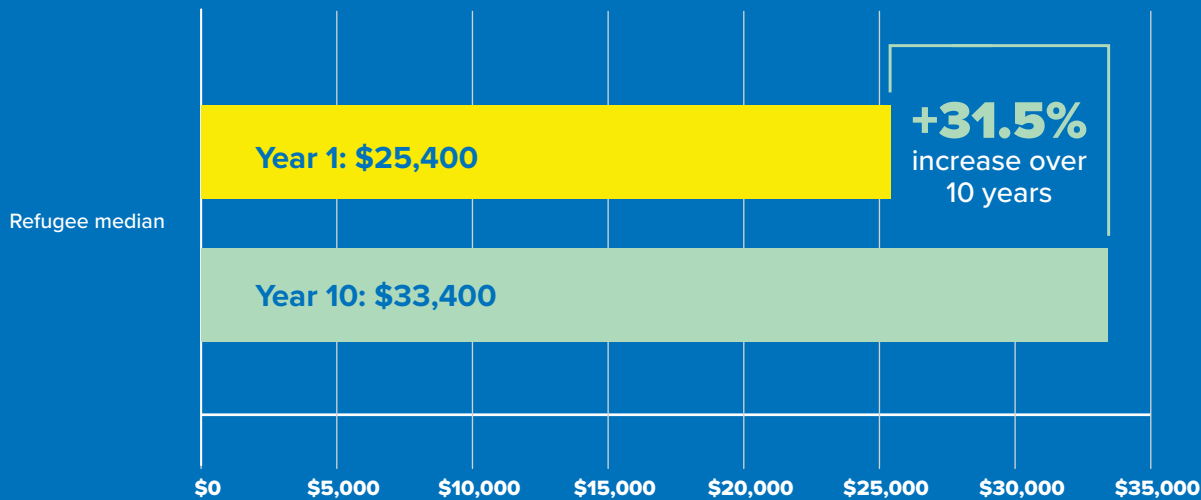
# Employment earnings grow

Refugee incomes climb year after year.

Refugee income grows steadily as individuals establish their roots and progress in their careers. While the initial years of resettlement involve significant transition, the data shows a clear and consistent upward trajectory in economic stability.

In their first year after arriving in Canada, the median employment earnings for refugees are approximately \$25,400. After a decade of participating in the workforce and integrating into their communities, these median earnings rise to \$33,400: a significant increase of 31.5 per cent. This steady growth highlights the resilience and determination of refugees as they build their lives from the ground up, moving toward the middle class and increasing their contributions to the Canadian economy.

## Refugee median employment earnings | 2022



Source: Statistics Canada tax year 2022

# Income distribution

Joining the middle class, 40% of refugees earn \$40,000 or more annually.

Refugees work hard to improve their financial standing. Many refugees progress from lower income brackets to higher ones – increasingly joining the middle class – another testament to their growing economic prosperity and integration.

## Comparing total income of refugees, all immigrants, and Canadian population | 2021



Source: 2021 Census



## ABDUL AL-KAF

*After finding safety in Canada, Abdul felt a deep desire to give back to the community that welcomed him. Today, he uses his background in engineering and his passion for service to help fellow newcomers in Ottawa build their new lives with the same dignity he was shown.*

# BUILDING CANADA'S FUTURE

Refugees enrich Canadian society through civic engagement, workforce participation and community building.

## Refugees in the workforce

Refugees are working in key sectors where Canada needs employees.

# Tekle Mehari,

a trained nurse from Eritrea, found new purpose and opportunity in Canada through the Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot (EMPP). After years of uncertainty in Ethiopia, Tekle was matched with a healthcare job at Chancellor Park in St. John's, Newfoundland. His qualifications and experience allowed him to contribute meaningfully to Canada's healthcare system, addressing labour shortages while rebuilding his life. Tekle's journey reflects the resilience and talent refugees bring to the workforce, transforming not only their own futures but also the communities they serve.

**AS A QUALIFIED  
AND EXPERIENCED  
NURSE, I BELIEVE  
I'M TAKING PART IN  
A CONSIDERABLE  
CONTRIBUTION TO  
THE HEALTHCARE  
AND THE WORK  
ENVIRONMENT  
IN CANADA.**

- TEKLE MEHARI

[READ HIS STORY HERE](#)



## The skilled workforce Canada needs

Refugees bring the diverse expertise required to power Canada's most essential industries.

Refugees are more likely than Canadian-born citizens to work in healthcare, trades, and manufacturing:

roles that are not only in high demand but are also fundamental to the country's infrastructure and daily life. While the data categories are broad, a closer look at the National Occupation Classification reveals that refugees are filling the "backbone" roles of our economy.

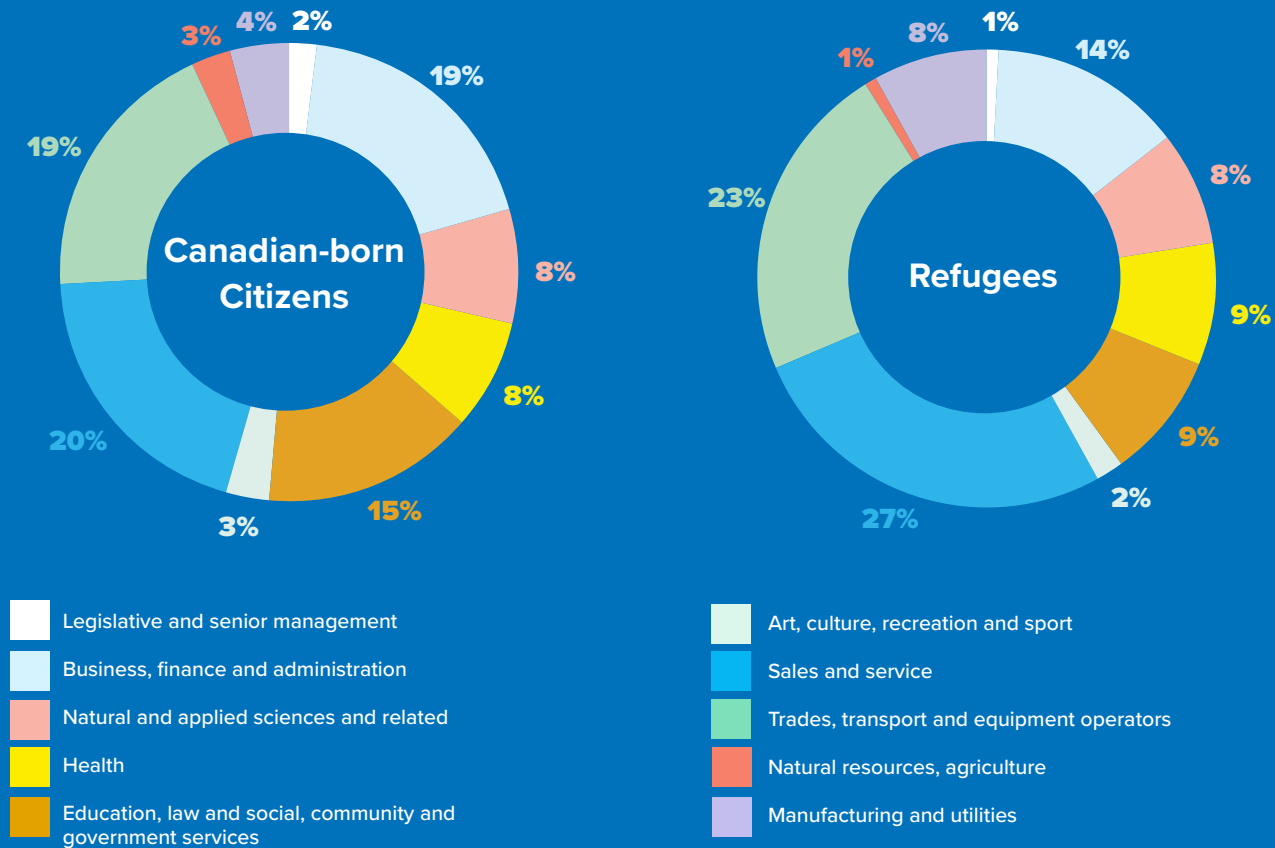
- **Trades, transport, and equipment operation:** Refugees are vital to the sectors that build and move Canada. This group includes the construction trades building our homes and hospitals, mechanics maintaining our vehicles and the transport drivers and transit operators who keep our national supply chains and local communities moving.
- **Manufacturing and utilities:** Refugees are twice as likely as Canadian-born workers to be employed in these sectors, which together contribute approximately 11.5 per cent of Canada's total GDP (9.5 per cent from manufacturing and 2 per cent from utilities). They serve as the machine operators in food processing, textile, and wood production, and as the equipment controllers within our power and water systems, ensuring that essential goods are produced and that our energy infrastructure remains stable.
- **Healthcare and services:** A higher percentage of refugees than Canadian-born citizens work in healthcare occupations, providing critical care in our hospitals and long-term care homes. Their presence in these fields, alongside their high participation in sales and service, highlights their willingness to step into roles with persistent labour shortages.

By providing the manpower and technical skills for these vital sectors, refugees do more than just integrate into the economy; they strengthen the very systems that support economic growth and community well-being for all Canadians.

Regarding health and trades in particular, the 2024-2033 Canadian government labour market projections identify a number of positions at risk of shortages. This includes in the area of nursing and health support services, positions which refugees like Tekle Mehari are helping to fill to support their community.

**Note:** The occupational categories above come from the Canadian government's National Occupational Classification (NOC) 2021. The full list of occupations under each category can be found at: <https://noc.esdc.gc.ca/Structure/Hierarchy>

## Industries of occupation



Source: 2021 Census

## Working age population

Canada has an aging population. Most refugees come to Canada early in their lives – providing workforce and human capital for many years.

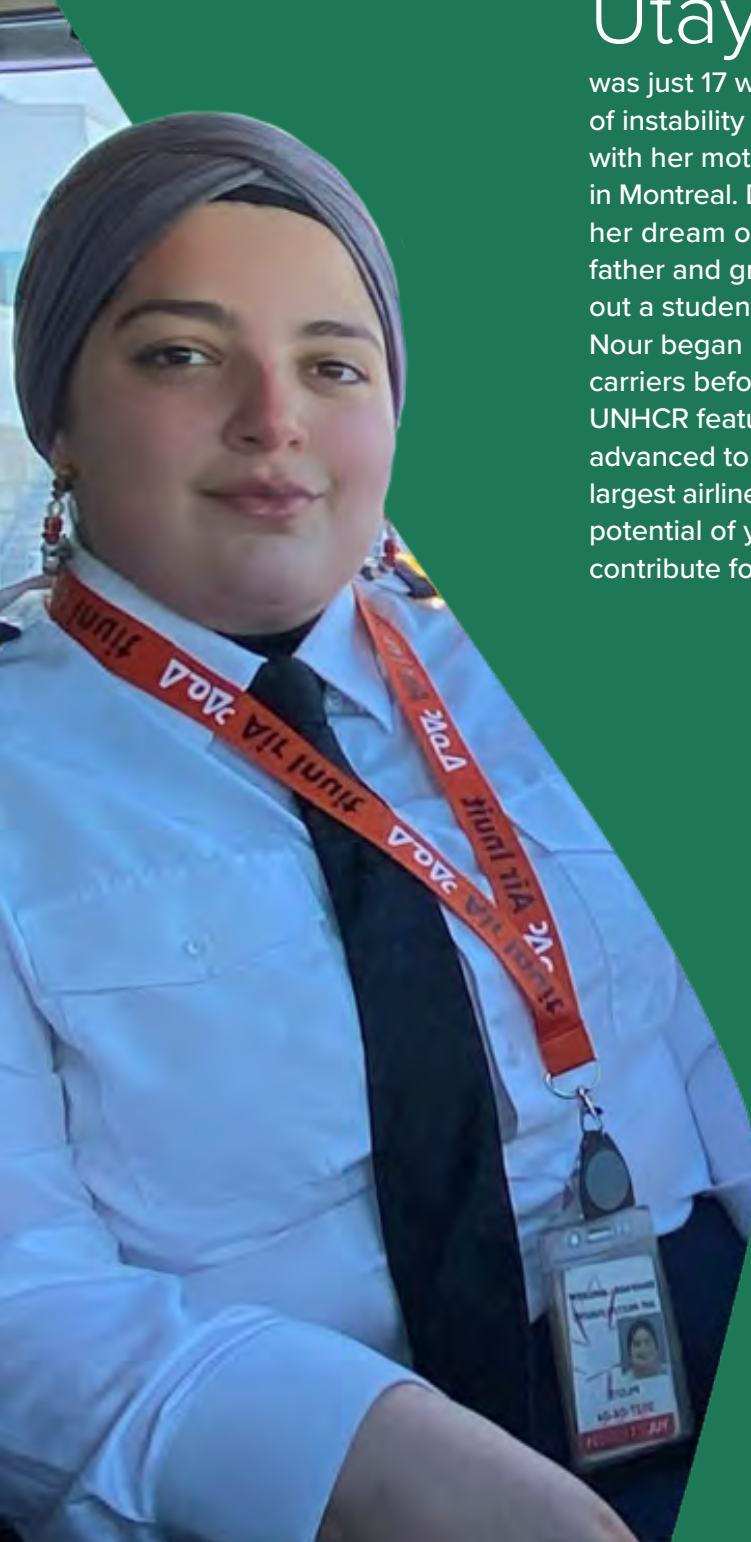
# Nour Utayim

was just 17 when conflict forced her to flee Syria. After years of instability in Lebanon, she arrived in Canada in 2017 with her mother and brothers, sponsored by a church group in Montreal. Despite arriving with only \$200, Nour pursued her dream of becoming a pilot, a passion inspired by her father and grandfather. She enrolled in flight school, took out a student loan and worked tirelessly to earn her wings. Nour began her aviation career flying for smaller regional carriers before joining Air Inuit in the Canadian Arctic. Since UNHCR featured her story as a pilot with Air Inuit, she has advanced to become a pilot with Air Canada, the country's largest airline. Her journey reflects the drive and long-term potential of young refugees who arrive in Canada ready to contribute for decades to come.

**I WAS JUST  
DREAMING OF A  
BETTER FUTURE...**

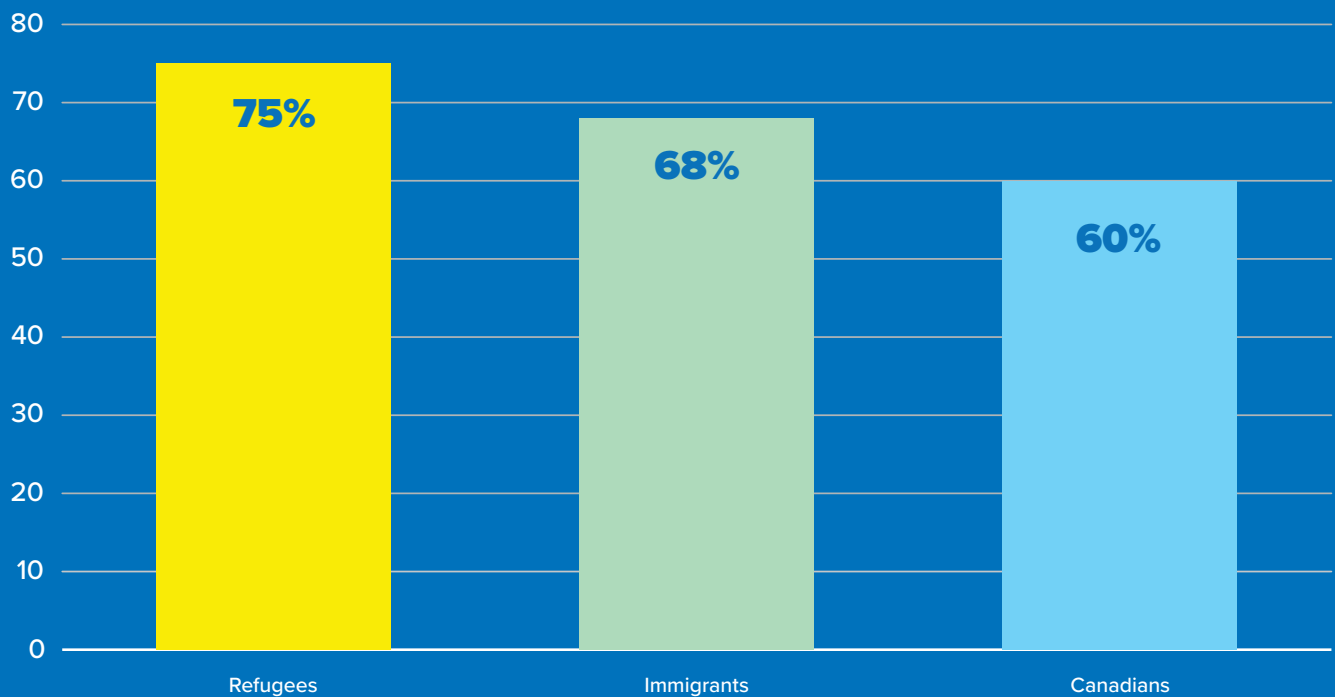
**- NOUR UTAYIM**

**READ HER STORY HERE**



A significant percentage of refugees are of working age, able and willing to help Canada's labour market. This demographic advantage supports the country's economic growth and sustainability.

## Percentage of population that are working age | 2021



Source: 2021 Census



**SOCIAL  
CONTRIBUTION:  
REFUGEES ARE  
INVESTED IN  
CANADA'S  
FUTURE**



### **Refugees contribute to the communities in which they live.**

Canadian communities thrive on a long history of volunteerism and civic participation. Refugees are a central part of this tradition; they don't just live in their communities, they actively build them. This commitment is most visible in their high rates of citizenship and their dedication to service.

## **Contributing through community service and volunteerism**

According to IRCC Newcomer Outcomes survey data, nearly one in three refugees said they participate in volunteer activities, providing essential support to the neighborhoods they call home. This participation often happens in the areas where communities need it most:

- **Faith groups and cultural associations:** Many refugees take on leadership roles within religious organizations, where they coordinate community kitchens, manage clothing drives, or organize festivals that celebrate Canada's multicultural identity.
- **Youth and sporting activities:** Refugee volunteers are frequently found on the sidelines as coaches and organizers. They use sports like soccer to help newcomer children build confidence and bridge cultural gaps, creating a sense of belonging for all youth.
- **Schools and education:** Contrary to the perception that language barriers prevent involvement, many refugees volunteer in schools as "cultural navigators." They assist with parent-teacher events, help in classroom activities and provide informal translation for other newcomer families to ensure no child is left behind.

# CITIZENSHIP

Refugees want to be Canadian. They're committed to support their new country.



## Mustafa Popalzai

arrived in Canada as a teenage refugee from Afghanistan. Overcoming early challenges, he pursued higher education and earned a master's degree in legal studies from Carleton University. Today, he serves as a Detective Constable with the Toronto Police Service and leads Project Hope, a grassroots initiative supporting thousands of newcomers. Mustafa's journey from newcomer to civic leader reflects the strong commitment refugees make to Canada. His story exemplifies how refugees not only seek safety but also embrace citizenship, contributing to public service, community building and the country's future.

**I REALIZED  
POLICING HERE  
IS DIFFERENT. AND  
MORE IMPORTANTLY,  
I REALIZED  
HOW MUCH I CAN  
ACTUALLY GIVE BACK  
TO THE COMMUNITY**

- MUSTAFA POPALZAI

[READ HIS STORY HERE](#)

Making the decision to become a Canadian citizen is a very strong statement. It expresses a desire to contribute to this country and fulfill all duties citizenship requires.

Citizenship rates for refugees are high – over 80 per cent after three years. To become Canadian citizens, refugees must live in Canada for at least three years, pay a fee and pass a test on their knowledge of Canadian history, geography, economy, government laws and symbols, as well as file taxes and demonstrate English or French language skills.

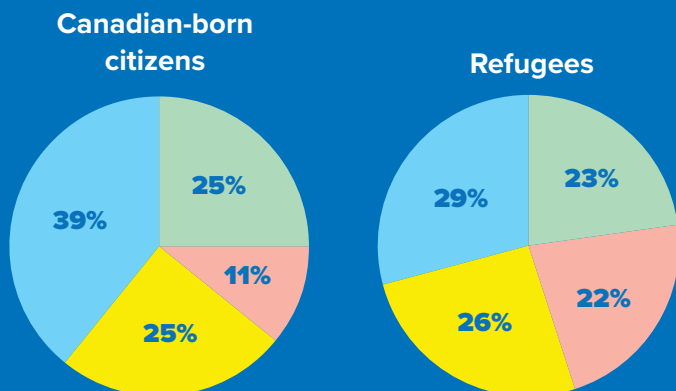
83.2% of refugees  
become Canadian  
citizens

*Source: IRCC Deputy Minister Transition Binder 2024*

# EDUCATION

## Highest level of education attained | 2021

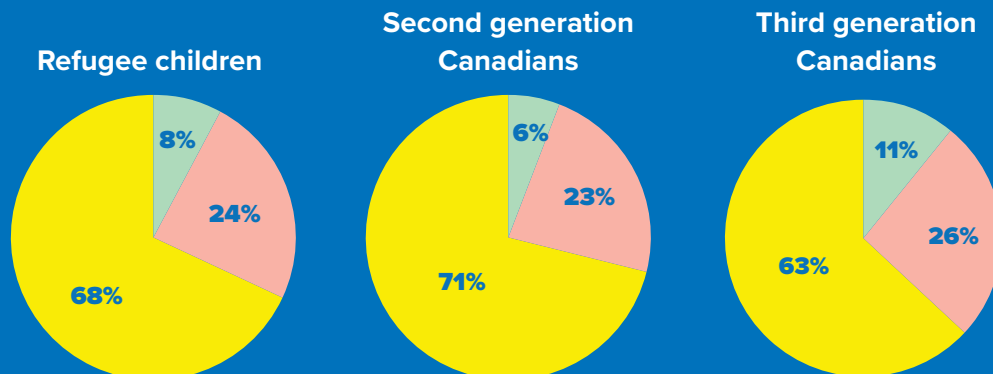
Education is a priority for refugees, with more than half earning a postsecondary certificate or higher. This equips them with the tools needed to contribute to Canada's future.



Source: 2021 Census

## Refugee children education | 2021

Refugees who arrive in Canada as children have postsecondary completion rates comparable to second and third generation Canadians.



Source: 2021 Census



# Farkhunda Muhtaj

arrived in Canada as a child of refugees from Afghanistan and found purpose through education and sport. She studied kinesiology at York University and became a standout soccer player. She was eventually named captain of the Afghanistan Women's National Team and used her platform to advocate for refugee rights and girls' education. Her leadership helped evacuate members of the national team from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Today, she plays professionally for Calgary Wild FC and co-founded the Scarborough Simbas, a free grassroots soccer program for children aged 5 to 12, many of whom are newcomers. Her work shows how refugee youth can turn their experiences and education into meaningful careers and community impact.

**IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT  
SOCCER. IT'S ABOUT  
GIVING YOUNG  
PEOPLE A SPACE  
WHERE THEY FEEL  
SEEN, VALUED,  
AND SUPPORTED.**

**- FARKHUNDA MUHTAJ**

**[READ HER STORY HERE](#)**



# Muhaddisa Sarwari,

a Hazara refugee from Afghanistan, spent part of her childhood in Indonesia, where refugee children were barred from formal schooling. When her brother, Abdullah, and other community members helped establish a volunteer-run Refugee Learning Center, it became her only pathway to learn and grow during those years. After resettling in Canada in 2019, Muhaddisa excelled academically and emerged as a strong advocate for refugee rights. Now studying political science at the University of British Columbia, she co-founded Parastoo, an initiative to support newcomers with education and resources, and earned the prestigious Loran Scholarship, one of Canada's top undergraduate honours — recognition of character, service, and leadership. Her journey shows how access to education equips refugees to thrive and contribute to Canada's future.

**EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THIS WORLD COULD HAVE ENDED UP A REFUGEE. WE ARE PEOPLE JUST LIKE YOU — AND OUR STORIES MATTER.**

**- MUHADDISA SARWARI**

**READ HER STORY HERE**



A photograph of a woman and a young girl. The woman, on the right, is wearing a maroon and white patterned headwrap and a matching off-the-shoulder dress. She is smiling and adjusting the zipper of a grey quilted jacket on the girl. The girl, on the left, is wearing a red knit hat with white snowflake patterns and the same grey quilted jacket. She is looking down at the jacket. The background shows a window with a view of a city and some indoor plants. A large green abstract shape is on the left side of the page.

## JOSEPHINE AND EVODIA

*For Josephine and Evodia, resettling in Canada meant more than finding safety: it meant finding a community where they truly belong. Today, they are thriving and grateful for the neighbors and friends who helped them turn a long journey into a fresh start in their new home.*



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The UN Refugee Agency