

# EMBASSY

## Unlocking the potential of Canada's refugees

Opinion | Immigration | [NADINE EDIRMANASINGHE](#)

Published: Wednesday, 09/26/2012 12:00 am EDT

What do Sioux Chief Sitting Bull, former governor general Adrienne Clarkson, singer/songwriter K'naan, and former NHL player Petr Nedved all have in common? Canada offered each refuge from persecution.

Last week, the world's attention was drawn to another notable refugee who called Canada home: Hawa Aden Mohamed. Mama Hawa, as she's often called, left the safety of her life in Canada and returned to Somalia in 1995 where she founded the Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development in the northeast region of Puntland.

Her efforts were celebrated on Sept. 17 when the UN High Commissioner for Refugees awarded her the prestigious Nansen Refugee Award, in recognition of her tireless work for Somalia's displaced women and girls.

Mama Hawa has been a vocal campaigner for women's rights. In a country where the UN reports that 98 per cent of women have undergone female genital mutilation, Mama Hawa's centre provides counselling for circumcised women and girls, and to survivors of gender-based violence. In providing education and vocational training, the centre has more ambitious aims: to provide the tools for women and girls to live on their own, and influence their own futures in Somali society.

The centre's impact has been dramatic. According to the 2010 Millennium Development Goals Progress Report, gross enrolments in primary education in Puntland increased steadily from 12 per cent in 1999 when the centre was founded, to 36 per cent in 2005-06. Most regions in Puntland hold the highest proportion of female pupils in all of Somalia, sitting at 40.2 per cent by 2006.

Since its establishment, the centre has assisted more than 215,000 people, with skills training, emergency assistance, and non-food items, among other things.

### **From K'naan to Michaëlle Jean**

Without diminishing the far-reaching impact of Mama Hawa's exceptional work, she is not alone among refugees in Canada. While exact statistics are unavailable, many refugees work to impart the values, opportunities, and stability often gleaned from Canada, to those back home.

Former governor general Michaëlle Jean currently serves as the UN special envoy to Haiti. Rapper K'naan has been a staunch advocate for Somalia, travelling to visit displacement and refugee camps in the region.

Less glamorous heroes abound as well. I have known persons who have raised funds to establish and maintain an orphanage, or travelled to provide vocational training to people back home.

This is not the typical image of a refugee, but refugees contribute to Canada's development in many ways. As evidenced above, they help raise the profile, reputation, and activities of Canada

around the world. Other contributions are closer to home. Evidence from Statistics Canada indicates that immigrants donate more money to charitable organizations than non-immigrants, even at lower levels of household income.

Further, of the immigrants who volunteer, they contribute on average more of their time than native-born Canadians.

Studies in both Canada and the US firmly established that immigrants are more likely than non-immigrants to establish businesses (particularly during economic downturns), thus contributing to economic growth and job development. Canadian immigrants and their children (unlike many in other developed countries) are also more likely to have post-secondary education, thus contributing to Canada's competitiveness in the growing knowledge-based economy.

Refugees, by definition, having successfully survived persecution on grounds such as race, religion, or political opinion, are resilient, industrious, and determined. It is not just that Canada offers them a world of possibilities. They themselves, hold a wealth of possibilities for Canada.

What this requires, however, is an investment on our part: investment in the provision of fair and equal due process, so that asylum seekers can properly navigate the Canadian legal system and present their cases for protection; investment in the provision of timely health care tailored to the realities of asylum seekers, who often arrive from less developed countries; and investment in ensuring access to education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Being a refugee is not a perpetual state of victimhood or want. It is a period in one's life. The person who emerges, what they do, what they contribute, and the gains that Canada can reap, is more fluid and dependent on the groundwork laid.

Like Mama Hawa, Canada received the prestigious Nansen medal in 1986. It is the only nation to be bestowed with the honour. As Canada charts a new path forward in its immigration and refugee policy, Mama Hawa, what she symbolizes, and Canada's role in her story, should not be forgotten.

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