

Good afternoon everyone!

I would like to begin by praising Graham Thompson for organizing this innovative initiative, which gives voice to refugee artists. I would also like to thank Mr. Thompson for inviting me to speak on this World Refugee Day.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, at the end of 2009, there were 43.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including refugees and internally displaced persons. If this was the population of a country, it would rank 29th in the world, leaving behind 199 of the world's 227 countries. I am not going to talk about numbers this afternoon, however, as, I am sure, you all heard about them from more authoritative sources.

What I would like to talk about here briefly is the refugee experience, particularly, the experience of those refugees who bring with them artistic or professional skills, qualifications, and experience to Canada and other Western countries.

We know that, at least in Canada, refugees as well as immigrants, have a higher level of education than that of the Canadian-born population. Yet a higher level of education by no means indicates that refugees also score higher in employment, earnings, or wealth. The relative poverty of refugees has become a very public issue since the late 1980s as stories of Ph.D.s and M.D.s driving taxis and delivering pizzas made their way into the popular media. Refugee professionals face a multitude of barriers in the labour market, including those erected by the professional regulatory bodies, the infamous Canadian experience

requirement by employers, and racism and other forms of discrimination.

Now, if you are a foreign-trained professional, you have several options when you do not get to practice your profession in Canada. First, you may become de-professionalized through unemployment or work which does not require any professional skills set.

Unfortunately, this is an all-too-common experience among the foreign-trained. Second, you may become re-professionalized by acquiring a new profession which may or may not be related to your primary profession. Third, if you are an *immigrant* professional, you may have what I call the "exit option," that is to say, you may return to your country of origin or move to a third country for professional pursuit. Refugees do not, of course, have this option at least until their countries of origin are safe to return to and/or until they become Canadian citizens.

I should add that this is not just a labour market issue. It is part and parcel of the human displacement experience with its geographic and social uprootedness. After making a multitude of investments for and in a profession, one's identity comes to include a strong occupational dimension as one of the building blocks of self. You spend long years and great energy to acquire and practice a profession, which becomes part of who you are, personally and socially. Imagine what happens when one is forcibly and all of a sudden separated from professional practice!

The loss of occupational identity can be destructive of self. It gives way to feelings of frustration, anger, and hopelessness; brings up issues of lower self-worth and self-esteem;

and causes self-blame and guilt of not contributing to society. And these are not just personal issues; they are very much public in their consequences as well as in their causes. Aside from the fact that the economy suffers from the un- or under-utilization of immigrant and refugee skills, qualifications, and experience, public institutions from social welfare to mental health care shoulder an additional burden.

One might say that human creativity does not recognize any boundaries or limitations. If you are an artist, you could keep writing, painting, or performing regardless of your legal or social status wherever you are. It's not that simple, however. International migration in its both forced and voluntary varieties is quite an uprooting phenomenon. Immigrants and refugees thus need a helping hand not just from formal institutions but also, I would say, more critically, from people in their occupational shoes. If you are a refugee professional or artist, you need an individual mentor, in addition to formal support, to get back to what you used to do.

What I have said so far does not in any way suggest that refugees should leave their destiny in the hands of others, helping or otherwise. Human self-initiative is the necessary condition but, sometimes, may not be the sufficient condition of success in life. This is where we need the helping hands of others or society at large. Mr. Thompson's initiative sets a good example for the rest of Canadians.

Thank you!