



Discussion

Gendered priorities, peace, and protection in private and homestay hosting for displaced and refugee women in Canada

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Homestay Hosting
Gender Equity
Policy
Health Equity
Access to Care

ABSTRACT

Global displacement has increased reliance on private and homestay hosting as community-based responses to humanitarian crises. While these arrangements provide immediate shelter and opportunities for social integration, they also create complex and often unequal dynamics, particularly for displaced women. This policy brief draws on emerging evidence and lived experiences from displaced Ukrainian women in Canada to highlight how homestay hosting operates at the intersection of housing, health, and social care systems. Hosting functions as both refuge and risk: it can foster safety, connection, and temporary stability, while also creating challenges related to limited privacy, unclear expectations, dependency, and unequal power relations. Gendered caregiving roles and emotional labor further shape women's well-being, access to healthcare, and integration trajectories. Structural gaps, including fragmented policy frameworks and limited coordination with health and social services, contribute to ongoing vulnerabilities. Homestay hosting is therefore positioned as a critical yet under-recognized social determinant of health. To address these challenges, this policy brief calls for the development of a coordinated national framework that integrates hosting within health and social care systems, ensures access to trauma-informed and culturally responsive supports, and strengthens guidance for both hosts and guests. Establishing monitoring mechanisms and linking hosting to long-term housing and integration pathways are essential to promote equity, safety, and sustainable outcomes for displaced women.

Background

Global displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with over 110 million people forcibly displaced worldwide by mid-2023 due to conflict, political instability, and climate-related crises.¹ In response, countries such as Canada have increasingly turned to private and homestay hosting as alternatives to state-sponsored refugee resettlement. These arrangements are often framed as cost-effective, compassionate, and community-driven solutions that provide immediate shelter and opportunities for social integration.^{2,3}

Despite these benefits, homestay hosting creates complex gendered dynamics. Displaced women often navigate unfamiliar domestic environments shaped by unspoken expectations, caregiving roles, and unequal power relations.⁴ Without adequate protections, women may experience emotional labor, limited privacy, cultural misalignment, and marginal social positioning.⁵ The large influx of displaced Ukrainians since 2022 has made these arrangements particularly visible in Canada, with thousands of households hosting women and children.⁶

While hosting can foster safety and belonging, it may also intensify

vulnerabilities linked to language barriers, trauma, immigration precarity, and limited access to services.⁷ Housing conditions are increasingly recognized as a social determinant of health, particularly for refugee populations navigating trauma and fragmented service access.⁸ However, private hosting models in Canada remain insufficiently integrated with health and community care systems, limiting their ability to address these intersecting needs.²

Evidence from participatory and qualitative research with displaced Ukrainian women in Canada highlights important health and care dimensions of hosting. Participants described heightened stress, anxiety, and uncertainty linked to precarious living arrangements, lack of privacy, and unclear expectations.² These stressors often compounded prior trauma, contributing to cumulative mental health burdens. Access to healthcare was frequently mediated by host households, with reliance on hosts for navigation, transportation, and interpretation, sometimes delaying or limiting care.⁹ Existing literature also highlights that hosts navigate significant emotional, relational, and practical challenges, including role ambiguity, boundary-setting, and the sustainability of support over time.^{7,9,10} Gendered expectations positioned

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ghrp.2026.05.003>

Received 4 December 2025; Received in revised form 29 April 2026; Accepted 24 May 2026

Available online 1 June 2026

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women in informal caregiving roles, including childcare, domestic work, and emotional support, reinforcing inequities and affecting well-being and access to care.

This policy brief aims to examine the health and gendered implications of private and homestay hosting for displaced Ukrainian women in Canada and to identify key policy gaps, with the goal of informing the development of coordinated, gender-responsive, and health-integrated hosting frameworks.

Key policy issues and evidence

Homestay hosting as refuge and risk

Homestay arrangements provide immediate shelter, safety, and opportunities for connection.² For many displaced women, these experiences offer temporary stability. However, the absence of formal frameworks often results in precarious relationships characterized by limited privacy, blurred boundaries, and unclear timelines. This dual nature as both refuge and risk highlights the need for policy interventions that address structural inequities while preserving the benefits of hosting. While Canada has introduced some program-specific supports, particularly through CUAET, these remain ad hoc and inconsistent. Informal guidelines from community organizations vary in scope and enforcement, and no cohesive national framework defines rights, responsibilities, or standards for hosting arrangements.

Gendered burdens and emotional labor

Women disproportionately shoulder caregiving roles within host households, including domestic work, childcare, and emotional support. These expectations often lack reciprocity and recognition, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality.⁴ Such responsibilities contribute to psychological distress, burnout, and reduced capacity to access healthcare. Expectations to conform to household norms further intensify emotional strain, shaping well-being and integration trajectories.

Structural gaps and policy inconsistencies

The lack of coordinated national guidelines leaves hosts and guests with limited clarity about roles and available supports. Service access including language training, trauma-informed care, and financial assistance varies widely across regions. Limited integration with health systems further restricts access to timely care. Without structured frameworks, private hosting risks reinforcing dependency, inequity, and exploitation.^{2,10} At the same time, hosting's appeal lies in its informality and voluntary nature, creating tension between institutionalization and community engagement. Effective policy must balance flexibility with safeguards by prioritizing supportive measures rather than burdensome regulation.

Integration and long-term outcomes

Homestay hosting can support social inclusion, but outcomes depend on host preparedness and systemic support. While some displaced women report positive experiences, others describe isolation and stigmatization. Integration framed solely as adaptation to host households risks erasing refugees' agency and identity.⁹ Hosting must therefore be linked to long-term pathways, including housing, employment, and community engagement, alongside sustained access to healthcare and mental health support.

Policy implications

To ensure that private and homestay hosting is safe, equitable, and health-promoting, the following actions are recommended:

- Develop a national hosting framework: Establish standardized guidelines defining roles, responsibilities, and minimum standards while maintaining flexibility to preserve voluntary participation.
- Integrate hosting with health and social care systems: Ensure access to primary care, mental health services, and culturally responsive care, supported by navigation and interpretation services.
- Provide trauma-informed, gender-responsive supports: Fund services addressing mental health, caregiving burdens, childcare, and language needs.
- Mandate host training: Require preparation in trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and mental health awareness.
- Implement monitoring and referral systems: Introduce routine check-ins and pathways to health and social services.
- *Address gendered care work: Provide supports such as childcare and peer networks to reduce caregiver burden.
- Link hosting to long-term integration pathways: Ensure transitions to independent housing, employment, and sustained healthcare access.
- Strengthen data collection: Monitor health and well-being outcomes to inform policy refinement.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Areej Al-Hamad: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Consent to participate

A written informed consent to participate was obtained from the participants.

Consent for publication

A written informed consent for publication was provided by the participant(s).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Toronto Metropolitan University Research Ethics Board (REB# 2023–209).

Funding

This study was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant (Grant # 430–2023–00080). SSHRC had no role in the design, execution, interpretation, or writing of the manuscript.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares the following financial interest, which may be considered a potential competing interest: this research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant. The author has no personal relationships, employment affiliations, or financial interests that could be perceived as influencing the work reported in this manuscript. No commercial or corporate entities were involved in the design, execution, or interpretation of the study.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author used [ChatGPT] in order to enhance readability. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Acknowledgment

The author extends sincere gratitude to the displaced Ukrainian women who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, which made this policy brief possible. Deep appreciation is also offered to the research assistants and project collaborators whose contributions to data collection, analysis, and discussion enriched the development of this work. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Insight Development Grant, which funded this research. Finally, the author thanks the community organizations and hosting networks in Toronto for their ongoing dedication to supporting displaced populations.

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