**Social egalitarianism and the private sponsorship of refugees**

1. **Introduction**

One well-trodden line of criticism, relating to the ongoing refugee crisis,[[1]](#endnote-1) is that wealthy Western states are generally failing to discharge the fullextent of their moral obligations to refugees.[[2]](#endnote-2) Like many others, I take part of those moral obligations to entail some degree of refugee resettlement: at least some refugees who have been admitted to those countries must be placed on the path to permanent membership, and given access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals.[[3]](#endnote-3) Currently, only a small number of states participate in UNHCR’s resettlement programme, with the USA resettling the greatest number of refugees, and countries like Canada, Australia, Norway, and the United Kingdom also providing a sizeable number of places. At the end of 2016, there were 17.2 million refugees of concern to UNHCR around the world, but less than one percent were resettled that year. Significantly, the alternatives to resettlement are deeply unpalatable. Developing regions continue to host 86% of the world’s refugees in long-term encampments; Turkey was the top host with 2.5 million refugees admitted in 2015, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan (UNHCR). Many refugees who reside in those camps continue to face impoverished and precarious conditions, vulnerable to human rights violations and unable to meaningfully rebuild their lives. In light of these considerations, it has been widely recognised that states ought to treat resettlement as an imperative, rather than an act of generosity or beneficence they may permissibly choose not to perform.

However, it would be short-sighted to conceptualise moral duties to refugees in purely statist terms. In line with a promising new trend, this paper shifts the focus to a different group of agents: private individuals. Specifically, I will be concerned with *private refugee sponsorship programs*. Under such programs, private individuals are permitted to bring refugees into their home country provided that they shoulder travel and resettlement costs, hence taking financial burdens off the shoulders of the state. Sponsors are also expected to provide refugees with the assistance and support they require to adjust to their new home. Privately sponsored refugees may also form a percentage of the total number that states have pledged to take in or be admitted in addition to that. While private sponsorship has been practised in Canada since 1979 (Canadian Council for Refugees) and fifteen of Germany’s sixteen federal states have established private sponsorship arrangements (Kumin 2015), Australia recently introduced a similar program, and New Zealand is poised to follow suit. Others yet have advocated to implement it in the USA and EU.[[4]](#endnote-4) I will focus more narrowly on the Canadian case because their private sponsorship program is the most well-entrenched and has provided the structural grounding for similar experiments in other states. However, the conclusions that I reach are intended to be applicable, at least in theory, to sponsorship programs in other wealthy nations that take a similar form.

No doubt, there are compelling reasons to endorse private refugee sponsorship, and I take stock of these below. Nevertheless, private sponsorship programs may be ethically troubling from the perspective of social equality. Specifically, owing to the relative lack of *explicitly-demarcated relationship boundaries* between private sponsors and refugees, I argue that there are legitimate worries about refugees being *dominated* and *infantilised*, rather than able to stand in equal relationships with their sponsors. To be clear, my goal is not to cast aspersions on the motivations or intentions of the sponsors who voluntarily take on the burdens of resettling refugees in their home countries. Rather, I am interested in how the structure of private sponsorship programs provides fertile ground for the cultivation of unequal social relationships, even for the most benevolent of sponsors.

My discussion will proceed in this order. In Section 2, I begin by providing some background context for how Canadian private sponsorship programs function. I continue, in Section 3, by considering the reasons that have been adduced in support of private sponsorship. Next, in Section 4, I lay out the foundations of my core argument by providing an account of social equality, and why it is important to protect the social equality of refugees. Section 5 expands on why private sponsorship programs may lead to unequal relationships between sponsors and refugees. Here, I use the analogy of professional relationships to underscore the importance of relationship boundaries. In professional relationships where one party wields power over another, clearly-demarcated relationship boundaries are commonly regarded as necessary to preserve the social equality of the power-subject. Such boundaries, however, are often absent in private sponsor-refugee relationships, rendering the refugees vulnerable to domination and infantilisation. In Section 6, I conclude by suggesting that states must introduce new measures to protect refugees’ social equality. With these measures in place, private sponsorship can – and should – continue to play a role in refugee settlement, but it should not be treated as an easy substitute for the robust government-sponsored resettlement programs that states have not sufficiently delivered.

1. **Private sponsorship in Canada**

Before I proceed to my normative analysis of private sponsorship programs, this section attends to the structure of ongoing private sponsorship programs in Canada, the only country in the world with an extensive history of refugee sponsorship. Since 1978, more than 20,000 privately sponsored refugees have arrived in Canada, including refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in the late 1970s and 1980s. More pertinently, nearly half of 40,000 Syrian refugees who arrived in Canada by the end of January 2017 were privately sponsored in whole or in part (Hyndman et al 2017). Although I cannot provide a comprehensive account of the Canadian private sponsorship system, it suffices, for my present purposes, to sketch out a brief description. I will explain the duties of sponsors to refugees, followed by the typesof sponsors currently recognised, how refugees are selected, and finally, what happens in the event of a sponsorship breakdown.

Under the Canadian program, sponsors voluntarily take on a wide variety of obligations, typically for a one-year period. They may choose to participate in the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program, which provides resources and services that address the ongoing information and training needs of private sponsors and prepare them to discharge their duties (Government of Canada, ‘Refugee Sponsorship Training Program’). Sponsorship duties can be usefully separated into *pre-arrival processing* versus *post-arrival* costs, as well as *material* versus *social* and *emotional* support. Prior to arrival, private sponsors must undertake a number of tasks: these include raising adequate funds for the refugee, assembling the necessary documentation, completing an application package, as well as renting lodging several days before their arrival. Post-arrival, private sponsors normally support the sponsored refugees in these ways:

‘[P]roviding the cost of food, rent and household utilities and other day-to-day living expenses; providing clothing, furniture and other household goods; locating interpreters; selecting a family physician and dentist; assisting with applying for provincial health-care coverage; enrolling children in school and adults in language training; introducing newcomers to people with similar personal interests; providing orientation with regard to banking services, transportation, etc; and helping in the search for employment.’ (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada)

As we may glean from the above list, some of these duties are purely material in nature; they simply require the sponsor to provide the refugee with financial support. However, others are more complex and have a strong social dimension to them. They involve helping the refugee to navigate potentially complicated bureaucratic structures or challenging social situations, and imparting the skills and information needed for them to eventually function independently as Canadian residents. There is also an important emotional dimension to sponsorship. After all, sponsors will be assisting people who have recently exited traumatic situations and have just begun the process of adjusting to a completely new environment. They may also have friends or family members in their home countries who are still exposed to peril. Given these circumstances, sponsors must also be sensitive to their emotional needs, rather than conducting the relationship in a bluntly cold and transactional manner.

Currently, Canada recognises three types of eligible private sponsors. The first are Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), which are incorporated organisations that have signed sponsorship agreements with the Canadian government to support refugees from abroad when they arrive in Canada (Government of Canada, ‘Sponsorship Agreement Holders’). They are able to work with other groups in the community, known as ‘constituent groups’, provided they remain responsible for providing refugees with emotional and financial support. Many of these are ‘religious, ethnic, community, or service organisations’. They include groups like the ‘Anglican Diocese of Calgary’, ‘British Columbia Muslim Association’, ‘Cross Cultural Settlement Service Society of British Columbia’, and the ‘Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council’ (Government of Canada, ‘Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program’). The second are Community Sponsors (CSes), which are organisations, associations, or corporations located in the communities where the refugees are expected to settle (Government of Canada, ‘Community Sponsors’). These include businesses, non-incorporated religious organisations, or even university groups. They are also able to partner with individuals or other organisations, known as co-sponsors, with whom they must share the responsibility of supporting the refugee. Last of all, Groups of Five (GOFs) consist of five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents who have arranged to sponsor refugees located abroad to come to Canada. In order to be eligible, each member of the group must be at least 18 years old, live in the community where the refugee is expected to settle, and agree to give settlement support for the length of the sponsorship, while also submitting a settlement plan, and proof that the group has the money to sponsor a refugee for one year. (Government of Canada, ‘Groups of Five’). GOFs are normally citizens who are attempting to sponsor family members, but some have reached out to sponsor refugees that they are not related to and have not even met before.

There are two ways that refugees can be matched to each of these sponsoring groups (Government of Canada, ‘Guide to the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program’). Firstly, refugees can be *sponsor-referred.* Sponsoring groups can suggest the name of a refugee or a refugee family that they are interested in sponsoring, and they may have obtained the referral from other parties like overseas contacts, friends, or relatives of the members of the group. For example, a GOF may refer a refugee who is the cousin of one of its members, or a SAH may receive a list of names from an overseas refugee organisation that they are tied to. Notably, in order to be referred as a refugee by a GOF or a CS, the applicant must already have refugee status – that is, an authorised body like the UNHCR or the government of the country that the applicant presently resides in must have determined that he or she meets their definition of a refugee. However, SAHs have a special status that allows them to sponsor applicants who do not yet have recognised refugee status. Refugees can also be *visa-office referred.* The Canadian Resettlement Operations Centre, based in Ottawa, administers an inventory of visa office-referred cases that have been identified by the UNHCR and selected by the Canadian government. Those refugees are then matched with private sponsors instead of being placed in government-assisted refugee programs.

Finally, sponsors and refugees may experience sponsorship breakdowns – a dissolution of the relationship between the two parties. Some reasons for breakdowns may include unreasonable disputes, such as ‘a personality conflict, unrealistic expectations, or disagreements about the level of support that is provided to the newcomer’; cases where the terms of sponsorship cannot be fulfilled because the refugee’s personal situation has changed, such as separation or divorce, or the newcomer’s decision to move to a different region; or because the sponsors are failing to fulfil their obligation of providing financial or settlement support (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program). If a sponsorship breakdown seems imminent, a local Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) office should be notified by either the sponsor or the refugee, and a preliminary inquiry where both parties are contacted will take place. If IRCC involvement is deemed necessary, a mediating IRCC officer will attempt to help resolve the dispute. During the mediation process, the sponsor must continue to carry out their sponsorship responsibilities, but emergency settlement assistance and financial support for the refugee can be obtained from alternative sources, like the local welfare authorities or funds normally reserved for government-assisted refugees. However, if a breakdown has already been declared, the IRCC officer will determine which party is responsible for it. In such cases, the sponsor may attempt to find a replacement sponsor; if a new sponsoring group is not found, the refugee may apply for funding from the IRCC. If it is determined that the refugee caused the breakdown, it is possible that he or she will not receive assistance from another private sponsor or the IRCC. On the other hand, if the sponsor is deemed responsible for the breakdown and unwilling to rectify the matter, a sponsorship default will be declared, meaning that the sponsor will not be permitted to submit further sponsorships until the default is resolved (i.e. that the group meets their necessary obligations). In more extreme cases, their sponsorship agreement may be suspended or cancelled, and the approval they have received from the IRCC for sponsoring other cases may be revoked.

1. **Why support private sponsorship?**

In this section, I propose four preliminary reasons for supporting the implementation and maintenance of private sponsorship programs like the one I have described above. The first, fundamental reason is that private sponsorship programs would significantly enhance states’ abilities to discharge their moral obligations to refugees, which I take to be of great urgency and importance. It is well-known that refugees who are in the process of fleeing their home countries often have their lives placed at serious risk and their basic needs unmet. The same may be said of refugees who have succeeded in fleeing their home countries and entering the borders of another state, but who remain trapped in detention centres or refugee encampments, where they are denied basic freedom of movement, and often subject to cruel, abusive and degrading treatment, including the threat of sexual assault (Parekh 2017). The urgency of protecting them from atrocious rights-violations means that a policy that *increases* resettlement spaces for refugees, allowing them to join political communities and resume ordinary lives in safer environments, ought to be welcomed. Assuming that privately sponsored refugees are admitted *alongside* officially pledged numbers under what has been termed the ‘principle of additionality’, individuals’ participation in such programs could be an effective way of sharing costs and responsibilities between stakeholders in destination countries that might encourage states to take in more refugees (OECD 2016). Even the Canadian Conservative Party, which previously accused the government of taking in more Syrians than they could handle, supported increasing the number of privately sponsored refugees as there was ‘no reason why Canada shouldn’t be harnessing the generosity of private citizens’ (Kantor and Einhorn 2017).

Secondly, private sponsorship programs may facilitate refugee integration by fostering social and emotional bonds between sponsors and refugees. Above and beyond the provision of practical guidance, private sponsorship allows refugees to be welcomed by the warmth and friendship of citizens, rather than left to navigate a strange and unfamiliar new society on their own. Through these social connections, refugees may be more quickly woven into the fabric of Canadian society. Relatedly, social ties between sponsors and refugees may also play an important role in changing *public perceptions* of refugees. Refugees are widely regarded as fundamentally different and threatening ‘others’. For example, according to a Pew Research Center survey, 46% of American respondents viewed Syrian refugees as posing a ‘major threat’ to the US (Smith 2017). Assuming that these prejudices play a significant role in public unwillingness to accommodate a greater number of refugees, and that states’ decisions vis-à-vis the refugee crisis are to some extent motivated by how citizens would react, it seems that shifts in public perception could be necessary to pave the way for more refugee-friendly policies. Private sponsorship could plausibly bring about such shifts. As Vasudha Tulla writes, it would ‘forge personal connections among individual Americans and resettled refugees, helping to dispel fears about refugees and national security risks’ (2016). It is also worth noting that private sponsorship programs are entirely paid for with private donations, and therefore more cost effective from the taxpayer’s perspective. This may also help to ward off commonplace beliefs about refugees posing a burden on public reserves that ought, instead, to be channelled towards needy citizens.

Thirdly, private sponsorship might encourage more public interest in refugee issues from influential interest groups with the power to bring about policy shifts. By offering funding opportunities that are directly linked to additional refugee admissions, it might increase private and philanthropic involvement in refugee resettlement. Consequently, as private sponsors become more personally invested in refugee issues, they may come to form a grassroots constituency that could pressure governments into increasing funding and implementing reforms to bring in more refugees, even at the government-assisted level (Tulla 2016).

Finally, private sponsorship programs may lead to better long-term outcomes for refugees. A recent analysis of income data on refugees in Canada showed that male and female privately sponsored refugees had a significantly higher income than government-assisted refugees, and it has also been found that privately sponsored refugees are more likely to become self-supporting sooner than government-assisted refugees (Tulla 2016). Significantly, the empirical research on the issue remains divided. For example, federal government data in 2016 showed no major difference in income earnings between government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees ten years after arriving in Canada. This is noteworthy as privately sponsored refugees typically arrive with much more education and official language ability (Hyndman et al 2017), and opens up the possibility that private sponsorship may on balance have been *worse* for the refugees. We should also avoid broad-brush interpretations of data, as the benefits of private sponsorship over government assistance may depend largely on facts that are unique to specific refugee groups being studied and are thus not readily generalisable to privately sponsored refugees as a whole. At the same time, there are methodological difficulties with defining what constitutes a ‘better outcome’ in the first place. For example, the seemingly positive finding that privately-sponsored refugees become self-supporting more quickly than government-assisted refugees may conceal the fact that they have worse long-term employment prospects than those who enrol in language classes or vocational training instead (Kumin 2015). All the same, while more empirical studies are needed, especially from the perspective of the refugees themselves, it remains plausible that the more direct and personal support offered by private sponsors, as well as greater access to social networks, could make private sponsorship overall more beneficial to refugees than government-assisted programs.

1. **Social equality**

Despite the potential boons of private sponsorship, private sponsorship programs may inadvertently foster serious social inequalities between sponsors and refugees. Before I explain why, however, two questions about the social egalitarian framework may be raised. First of all, what is social equality? Secondly, why should we be concerned about potential unequal relationships between refugees and their sponsors? I attend to these questions below.

A number of prominent contemporary philosophers have underscored the importance of equal relationships between persons.[[5]](#endnote-5) These accounts emphasise the intrinsic value of relationships that are ‘in certain crucial respects at least, unstructured by differences of rank, power, or status’ (Scheffler 2012). One oft-cited example is Elizabeth Anderson’s statement that the proper aim of egalitarian justice is ‘to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others’ (1999). For Anderson, such a community can only be realised if oppression, defined here as ‘forms of social relationship by which some people dominate, exploit, marginalize, demean, and inflict violence upon others’, is abolished. Granting the importance of protecting social equality between citizens, however, it is not immediately obvious why we should worry about sustaining equal relationships between refugees and private sponsors.

First of all, taking into account the discussion in the previous section, aren’t private sponsors doing a lot to *help* refugees? It seems offensive to accuse them, on the contrary, of dominating, exploiting, marginalizing, or inflicting violence on refugees. However, it is important to note that ‘helping X’ and ‘treating X as one’s inferior’ are not mutually exclusive. Consider, for example, the ‘friendly visitors’ from the Philadelphia Society for Organizing Charitable Relief and Repressing Mendicancy (SOC) who operated in the 1880s. Under the SOC’s auspices, ‘friendly visitors’, who were mainly upper-class white women, paid visits to the poor in order to encourage reformation of their character, which was at the time considered the primary cause of poverty. Despite the benevolent intentions of the friendly visitors, it is impossible to say that they related to the poor as equals. Rather, ‘[t]he model for visiting was the relationship between mistress and servant’, where the morally enlightened rich would lead the poor away from their ‘inherent defects of character’, and help to reduce the large and growing number of human beings who fulfilled no purpose other than to prey upon worthier members of society (Rauch 1975). The friendly visitors unwittingly contributed to the continued stigmatisation of the poor by treating them as a morally deficient, inferior class. The point, here, is that *helping* can also be *inferiorising*, often in subtle and insidious ways.

A second objection might go like this. Typically, the demands of social equality are assumed only to apply to *citizens*, within the context of a bounded society (Miller 2005). While Anderson’s vision of ‘democratic equality’ does not explicitly exclude non-citizens from its purview, it is clear that the ‘community of equals’ she wants to construct refers primarily to a community of *citizens*. But privately sponsored refugees are not citizens – at least, not yet. Of course, we should not go out of our way to subordinate them. But we may not have as strong of an obligation to ensure that they are treated as social equals, compared to the obligations we owe to our fellow citizens.

This objection, I think, is easily answered. There is a robust case for protecting the social equality of refugees *even* within a narrowly constrained conception of social equality. The goal of private sponsorship programs, after all, is for sponsors to help refugees along the path to citizenship; privately resettled refugees are citizens-in-training, so to speak. In preparing refugees to becomecitizens, it would be self-defeating to use means that threaten their ability to function as social equals, particularly when we also want them to extend the same kind of egalitarian treatment to other citizens in the same society. If refugees are persistently treated as the inferiors of private sponsors, as the poor were in their relationships with ‘friendly visitors’, this would endanger their ability to smoothly integrate into a ‘community of equals’, as well as risk implying that it is morally acceptable to treat other citizens in subordinating ways.

**5. Social equality and private sponsorship**

In the previous section, I argued that, despite the benevolent intentions of sponsors, and even assuming a limited conception of social equality that only need apply between citizens, we have good reason to pay attention to the social equality of privately sponsored refugees. I now turn to my core argument. I contend that private sponsor-refugee relationships are morally risky because they lack explicitly-demarcated relationship boundaries. To bring out this point, it is useful to consider the analogy of professional relationships – for example, between doctor and patient, or between teacher and student. Within these contexts, relationship boundaries are widely considered to be an extremely important means of protecting patients or students from abuses of power that threaten their social equality. Yet, while private sponsors often exercise power over refugees in a way that parallels the exercise of power within professional relationships, the sponsor-refugee relationship is not reined in by similar boundaries*.* Their absence leads to a significant risk that the most well-intentioned of private sponsors may inadvertently treat refugees in inferiorising ways. To be clear, I am not claiming that sponsor-refugee relationships *ought*, ideally, to look exactly like professional ones. Rather, the following discussion of professional relationships is intended to clarify the exact character of the risks that privately sponsored refugees are exposed to in the absence of clearly-demarcated relationship boundaries. These risks, I believe, must be managed through targeted policy responses.

I begin by spelling out two interrelated boundaries that are frequently observed within professional relationships: limitations on *how much intimacy* *may be shared* between the relevant parties, and on *how role-responsibilities are acquired or discharged*. I go on to show how, unlike state-sponsored refugees, privately-sponsored refugees are insufficiently protected by those boundaries. Lastly, I identify two types of socially inegalitarian treatment that the absence of relationship boundaries may lead to: domination and infantilisation.

***a. Relationship boundaries***

We often find ourselves in professional relationships with persons who are able to exercise power over us. Roughly speaking, they might be able to shape the options available to us (like in the case of a manager who has the power to decide whether I am given a promotion at work), and/or shape how we respond to the options on the table, because we defer to their judgment (like in the case of a lawyer providing legal advice). While we generally regard such relationships as benign from the perspective of social equality, we also recognise that the power-imbalance renders them *morally risky*. Because one party is able to effectively wield power over the other, there is the constant danger of power trespassing into areas of the power-subject’s life that it should not. A precautionary measure commonly taken in recognition of this riskiness is the observance of relationship boundaries – that is, maintaining a clear boundary between the professional and personal. As I will show, these boundaries are built into our understanding of how relationships with significant power-imbalances ought to be conducted. This is not to suggest that relationship boundaries must always be fastidiously maintained in practice, such that the slightest departure from them would constitute a serious wrong – depending on the circumstances, departures may sometimes be warranted, even welcomed. Rather, relationship boundaries are more accurately regarded as key principles that guide our conduct within professional relationships, whose proper application requires care, sensitivity, and attention to the unique character of each relationship.

*i. Intimacy*

One distinctive type of relationship boundary relates to the degree of intimacy that is permissible between the power-holder and power-subject. Think, for example, of prohibitions on romantic relationships between doctors and patients, or professors and students. However, by intimacy, I don’t necessarily mean romantic or sexual intimacy, or even the sharing of intimate knowledge, but close entwinement between the lives of two individuals. Being intimate with my friends, for example, means including them in many key aspects of my life, and sharing different parts of myself with them. As my close friend, you are not only my study partner, but also my hiking and shopping buddy, as well as a close confidante. It would be unusual for me to call you my friend, yet deliberately close myself off to you by insisting that we *only* meet in my office, and that we talk *exclusively* about philosophy.

In contrast, we often put in great effort to remain *separate* from those we stand in professional relationships with. To illustrate this point, consider my relationship with my doctor, who holds power over me insofar as she is able to shape my options (like deciding which course of medication to put me on), as well as influence how I decide between those options (because I defer to her expert judgment on my health). During my consultation, I may share some extremely intimate, even embarrassing personal details about my health. But no matter how pleasant or conversational our sessions may be, a sharp line is drawn between the realms of the professional and the personal: she is my *doctor*, not my friend, and we must both be respectful of this distinction, at least until our professional relationship comes to an end.[[6]](#endnote-6) For example, it would be considered inappropriate for my doctor to enquire about my love life and attempt to set up dinner with me the following day, or even for her to add me on Facebook – things that would be perfectly normal in the context of most friendships. This is not to say that our personalrelationships don’t also contain boundaries. I may, for example, request that my best friend refrain from calling me with her woes after 9pm on weekdays. But such boundaries are best understood as restrictions on how best to conduct intimate relationships, rather than restrictions on *intimacy* itself.

Restrictions on intimacy in professional relationships may serve a number of diverse goals. For example, consider the goal of fairness. We could say it is wrong for a student to become bosom buddies with her professor because the professor may unfairly favour her over other students. But I want to suggest that these boundaries predominantly serve to uphold social equality between the parties involved. Crucially, they allow the power-subject to reserve control over the terms in which they can be seen by the power-holder, and more fundamentally, the ways in which the power-holder is able to *interact* with them. One straightforward reason is that we worry that revealing particular aspects of ourselves may have an impact on how they choose to exercise their power. A student may be motivated to maintain her opacity in this regard because she is afraid that her love of parties and alcohol may change her professor’s impression of her as a dedicated scholar, and hence how the professor writes her letter of recommendation. For this reason, she would be absolutely horrified at the thought of running into her professor at a party.

More fundamentally, however, the exercise of power makes it particularly important that we can securely exclude power-holders from the parts of our lives that are free of their power. We prevent them from *looking into* or *participating in* our personal lives to mitigate the risk of their power in the professional realm objectionably translating into power in the *personal* realm. A familiar example of the trespass of professional power is Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment and assault of the actresses he worked with. While Weinstein’s behaviour is a particularly egregious example, my aversion to friendship with my doctor has a similar root: I fear that my deference to her in the clinic might seep into our interactions outside of it, inadvertently establishing her status as my superior. In short, maintaining a boundary between the personal and the professional serves to restrictthe flow of power, preventing it from spilling out into unwanted territory.

*ii. Role-responsibilities*

A second distinctive kind of relationship boundary relates to how the power-holder may acquire and discharge their responsibilities to the power-subject. Returning to the same analogy, a doctor’s responsibilities to her patients seem dependent on their consentto treatment. She may have general responsibilities *qua* doctor, but those are only directed to particular individuals once they choose to consult her or agree to be assigned to her for particular expressed purposes. It would, for example, be wildly intrusive for her to turn up unsolicited at a stranger’s door, having surveyed them from afar, to warn them about their high risk of stroke – or even for her to give a patient advice on fertility if they come in simply for her opinion on a lingering cold. Nor does their consent does not give the doctor free reign on how to discharge her responsibilities: she is not permitted to avail herself of means apart from those conventionally available to her. It is perfectly appropriate for her to dispense advice on my dietary preferences during a medical consultation, assuming that I have asked for it, but it would be wrong for her to station herself in my apartment, monitoring my meals to make sure that I am eating healthily.

These boundaries on how responsibilities are acquired and discharged may also serve diverse ends, including protecting patients from the harms of unconventional or experimental treatment, but some of them are socially egalitarian. As I have suggested, in deferring to another person’s professional opinion, we submit to them by giving them power to influence how our lives go. Consequently, it seems crucial for their power to be limited to the aspects we consent to, expressed only in the ways we intend. For me to stand as an equal to other members of society, I cannot be vulnerable to others exercising power over me whenever they choose; I must only be subject to their power if I have consented to it in a particular context.[[7]](#endnote-7) Furthermore, even *within* that context (e.g. a patient sitting in her doctor’s office), the deferential attitude that we take on towards the power-holder applies only to the specific realms we have consented to. This is why my doctor behaves in an objectionably superior way if she tries to dispense advice on my (admittedly) poorly-managed finances. Last but not least, conventional restrictions on how responsibilities may be permissibly discharged connect to the restrictions on *intimacy* I considered*.* Again, to protect our equal status, we don’t want the power exercised over us in the professional realm leaking into the personal realm. Professional power-holders must respect the bifurcation between the personal and professional by taking care to discharge their responsibilities only through the means available *qua* their professional roles.

***b. Private sponsorship and relationship boundaries***

Having underscored the importance of relationship boundaries to social equality within professional relationships, I now explain why the lack of those boundaries within private sponsor-refugee relationships may threaten refugees’ social equality. To be sure, the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) provides government-assisted refugees with forms of support that look basically identical to those expected of private sponsors, including ‘greeting at the airport, temporary housing, help with finding permanent housing, help with registering for mandatory federal and provincial programs, and personal finance help’ (Government of Canada, ‘What kind of support do government-assisted refugees get?’). Nevertheless, one vital difference is that, while RAP support is delivered by members of service provider organisations who act in a purely *professional* capacity, and are thus guided by typical relationship boundaries, private sponsorship relies on the agency of ordinary citizens who are not subject to similar norms.

How, and why are private sponsor-refugee relationships relatively unconstrained by relationship boundaries? Much like in my relationship with my doctor, the professional context of refugees’ relationships with service providers impose institutionally-guided limitations on how entwined the lives of service providers and refugees can be. Even if service providers’ relationships with particular refugees become more familiar and friendly over time, it would generally be considered boundary-violating for them to celebrate occasions with the refugees, meet their friends, care for their children, or even live in the same house; their interactions with the refugee are confined to a certain space. However, there are no clear-cut limitations on intimacy between refugees and private sponsors, for whom such shared activities may be commonplace. Private sponsors have professional*-like* responsibilities to refugees, but they may simultaneously occupy *personal* roles as family, friends, or community leaders. As a result, there are no barriers in place to prevent the power they exercise *qua* sponsor from being exercised in other dimensions of the refugee’s life.

Also consider how members of service provider organisations take up and discharge responsibilities to refugees. Like doctors to their patients, they obtain responsibilities to particular refugees when those refugees actively seek them out and consultthem about particular matters. Furthermore, like other social workers, members of service provider organisations discharge those responsibilities in line with pre-established institutional protocol: even if consulted about financial matters, they may not, for example, follow refugees to the bank and demand to see their statements. With private sponsors, however, it is not always clear when the ‘consultation’ ends. Certainly, the privately sponsored refugee can be said to have consented to her sponsor’s assistance at the beginning of the relationship. Yet, unlike government-sponsored refugees who voluntarily seek out service providers when they require help, it is not always clear which kinds of assistance are validated by her ongoing consent. For example, there may be a strong temptation for sponsors to provide advice or support that may strike us as jarringly intrusive, yet still fall within the description of their sponsorship duties. Take, for example, the private sponsor’s duty to provide financial support to refugees. What if the refugee is seen to spend the money *unwisely –* perhaps on luxury items instead of ‘essential’ goods and services? Is it also the sponsor’s duty to dispense financial advice, or establish rules about how the money ought to be spent, regardless of whether these have been requested by the refugee? While the extent of service providers’ assistance is limited by what the refugee has actively requested, the lack of clarity surrounding the exact scope of private sponsors’ responsibilities place the refugees at risk of exercises of power they have not consented to. Neither are there clear limitations on the means sponsors may permissibly employ to fulfil their responsibilities, because there are no pre-established conventions or protocol that they can refer to. Some private sponsors may simply discharge their duty to help refugees find employment by directing them to employment agencies, or job-advertising websites. Yet, seemingly without flouting any official boundaries, other sponsors may refer refugees to friends who are looking to fill a position, even if this creates undue pressure for a refugee to take on a particular job – a highly personal decision that *shouldn’t* fall within the sponsor’s purview. Overall, private sponsors may unintentionally subject refugees to problematic overreaches of power that set back their social equality.

In sum, I contend that private sponsor-refugee relationships may lack two significant types of relationship boundaries: high levels of intimacy between refugees and private sponsors are not circumscribed, nor are the responsibilities that private sponsors take up and discharge similarly regulated. To conclude this section, I will discuss two types of socially inegalitarian treatment that may spring out of the absence of relationship boundaries.

***c. Two types of socially inegalitarian treatment***

*i. Domination*

The lack of relationship boundaries between refugees and their sponsors may risk dominating refugees.[[8]](#endnote-8) Chiefly, private sponsors may be endowed with the power to arbitrarily terminate their support to the refugee. Earlier, I argued that while many relationships may contain an unequal balance of power, those relationships are not threats to social equality *per se*, so long as the power-holder’s influence is adequately contained within specific realms. In order to facilitate containment, it is imperative that the power-holder be excluded from intimate relationships with power-subjects. However, intimacy between refugees and private sponsors may lead to situations where the refugee’s behaviour in one realm is perniciously used against them, by the sponsor, in others. For example, the refugee’s reasonable non-compliance with the sponsor’s demands, and the sponsor’s subsequent perception of them as disobedient or disorderly, may be used to justify the withholding or withdrawing of support. The potential loss of support would likely be perceived by the refugee as an enormous cost if they are not fully aware of alternative funding sources and how to apply for them, or even falsely believe that the sponsor has the capacity to deport them to their home country.

While more information is needed about the extent to which private sponsors are dominating, we have reason to believe that domination is not unusual. An advocate interviewed by the *Calgary Herald*, for example, stated that Syrian newcomers in Calgary have ‘alleged abuse, manipulation, and a complete lack of financial or emotional support from the relatives that sponsored their arrival in Canada’, and are ‘terrified of speaking out about their struggles’ because they do not wish to say anything bad to jeopardise their relationship with their sponsors (Klingbeil 2016). It is not difficult to imagine a refugee who suffers emotional abuse at the hands of a privately sponsor who is *also* her family member, but dares not report the abuse for fear that she, as the family member warns, may be swiftly returned to Syria. In turn, the abuser gains confidence to intensify abuse, knowing that they will not be reported to the authorities. But relationships of domination need not even be abusive. After all, domination in this case is characterised by the sponsor’s *capacity* to arbitrarily withdraw support from the refugee, not abusive behaviour in itself. Consider another example. A large number of SAHs are religiousorganisations, and this may be a boon to refugees who themselves come from a religious background. Sponsors who share their religious worldview and beliefs might be more likely to understand and provide emotional support to them from an appropriate perspective, as well as offer comforting and familiar presence in an otherwise alien new environment. The flip side, however, is that there may be pressure on refugees to continue demonstrating adherence to the relevant religion, or to put on a performance of devotion, in order to satisfy members of the sponsoring organisation. Matters may be worsened if refugees actively desire to *exit* the religious group but find themselves in a position where they are unable to do so, for fear of offending members of the organisation and jeopardising their position. While it is possible that most refugees taken in by religious organisations will have no desire to leave their religion, nobody should feel like they have to demonstrate religious devotion or fidelity that meets the potentially arbitrary standards of another in order to continue accessing crucial modes of support.

It might be objected that there are already measures in place to reduce the incidence of domination. After all, sponsorship breakdown does not mean that a refugee will be involuntarily repatriated – at the very worst, they will simply not be given further financial assistance from private sponsors or the IRCC, but this does not block them from applying for social welfare available to Canadian residents. Furthermore, as mentioned in Section 2, refugees can always report their situation to an IRCC office and seek help from a mediating officer. Yet the point, I think, is not that there *no* safeguards in place to protect refugees from domination. Rather, it is not obvious that more fine-grained instances of domination that fall short of outright abuse – for example, the pressure to demonstrate adherence to a religion – would be recognised as morally problematic by the IRCC. Individual and societal factors may also discourage refugees from seeking out or benefiting from those safeguards. Some individual factors in play may be cultural and language barriers that hold refugees back from complaining about their mistreatment, their unfamiliarity with the Canadian social and political context, or a deep distrust of the state following their past experiences. Also consider the preponderant social attitude that refugees ought to be *grateful* for their admission, as well as show gratitude towards those who have helped them obtain it.[[9]](#endnote-9) Refugees who register complaints about their sponsors’ behaviour may be deemed overly demanding or fussy with regard to their new living arrangements, and encouraged to make compromises or be more tolerant of the sponsor’s behaviour even by mediating officers who are genuinely doing their best to be impartial. The constant pressure on refugees to express ‘gratefulness’ may also lead them to second-guess their own unhappiness or discomfort. Even if not actuallyjudged as such, they may convince themselves that finding fault with the sponsor amounts to ungratefulness on their part.

*ii. Infantilisation*

Domination aside, the lack of relationship boundaries may *infantilise* refugees. Infantilisation, I take it, is a quintessentially inegalitarian attitude because it entails regarding another person as if they are physically and/or psychologically weaker or less capable (and hence childlike), consequently requiring our protection and tutelage.[[10]](#endnote-10) Recall that we generally recognise strict limitations on how our responsibilities to one another are acquired and discharged when they involve the exercise of power, such as the deference I show to my doctor when she discharges her responsibility of care by making a medical diagnosis. Those limitations serve to protect our social equality by stemming the flow of power. However, private sponsors may take on responsibilities or discharge them in a way that is infantilising to refugees. To see why, it is worth quoting a passage from a *New York Times* piece on privately-sponsored refugees:

Mr. Nammoura, the refugee advocate in Calgary, said he saw a pattern among the cases. The Canadians, who feel responsible for the refugees’ success, want to give them as much help and direction as possible. But many Syrians, finally safe after years of war and flight, want to exhale before launching into language regimens and job searches, and sometimes feel that sponsors are meddling.

When the Ballani [a Syrian family] sponsors sought advice from an Arab community center caseworker and an older Syrian mother, they were told to be harsher — to threaten fines or loss of sponsorship if the couple did not accept their guidance. Instead, the sponsors tried to strike a balance, being insistent on issues like health and education but easing off in other areas.

A few weeks before Ramadan, the Ballanis raised the prospect of missing school during the month of long fasts. “It’s really hard because we have to fast 16 or 18 hours,” Muaz Ballani told the sponsors.

Ms. Breier and her partners dismissed the idea, saying they feared that the couple would lose their slots if they missed too many classes. The Ballanis quickly relented. It was not clear how much freedom they felt to express disagreement to outsiders; they seemed reluctant to acknowledge anything but gratitude. (Kantor and Einhorn 2016)

Arguably, in barring the Ballanis from missing school, Ms Brier and her partners *infantilised* them. They are, after all, not parents with the right to dictate when their children must attend classes, but adults relating to other adults.

In response, it may be said that the sponsors were merely acting in line with their responsibilities – responsibilities that the Ballanis have consented to. Given the responsibility they had acquired to help the Ballanis become acclimatised to their new environment and quickly achieve independence, it made sense for Ms. Brier and her partners to discourage them from missing school if their lack of attendance would disrupt the integration process. Even if we concede that the sponsors acted paternalistically by ‘meddling’ in what should have been a decision left to the Ballanis, it seems that some degree of paternalism may be permissible in this context, given the value and importance of successful resettlement. Furthermore, there are important moral differences between various types of paternalism. Consider the distinction between *means* vs *ends* paternalism, and *hard* vs *soft* paternalism (Sunstein 2014). Ends paternalists attempt to affect people’s choices of ends, while means paternalists respect people’s ends and attempt only to influence their choices of means; that is, how they go about achieving those ends. For example, we might say that it is wrong for sponsors to try to change refugees’ ends, such as convincing them to switch career paths. But this does not necessarily imply that it is wrong for sponsors to try to influence the means through which refugees pursue their chosen career path, such as encouraging them to take English classes to increase their chances of landing a desired job. On the other hand, hard paternalists engage in coercive behaviour to influence people’s means or ends (such as what was suggested to the Canadians by the Arab caseworker and Syrian mother), while soft paternalists aim to preserve freedom of choice by persuading or ‘nudging’ (the sponsors’ expression of disapproval towards the Ballanis’ preference to miss school, which led the Ballanis to relent even though they were notcoerced into doing so). It would be short-sighted to dismiss all forms of paternalism from sponsors as equally infantilising, especially if the paternalistic behaviour in question is ‘soft’ and ultimately respects the refugee’s ends. Presumably, both the Ballanis and their sponsors *don’t* want the Ballanis to lose their places in school because it would seriously set back their resettlement process.

I want to push back against the suggestion that paternalism in relationships can be permissible if it is instrumental to the performance of a role-responsibility. Many professional relationships that contain power-imbalances do not actually allow paternalism. In giving her diagnosis, my doctor surely does not act paternalistically because I have *consented* to be medically ‘tutored’. Moreover, even she is responsible for my health, she is barred from discharging that responsibility by intervening with me against my will – for example, by subjecting me to a forced operation. She must respect my choices even if they prove detrimental to my health.[[11]](#endnote-11)

More importantly, the main objection I am advancing is not that paternalism is *never permissible*. The problem lies with the absence of clearly demarcated relationship boundaries between refugees and private sponsors and what it means for paternalistic behaviour. Even if we grant that *some* paternalism can bepermissible, in order for the subject of paternalism to preserve their social equality, it seems that there must be clear-cut boundariesbetween the aspects of an individual’s life where paternalism may be exercised, and those wherein the paternalist must exercise due restraint. Unfortunately, as we have seen, it is particularly difficult to carve out boundaries within the refugee-sponsor relationship. The sponsor is elected to offer the refugee guidance with regard to aspects of their lives that we would ordinarily consider private or personal, such as decisions over where they choose to live; where their children ought to go to school, and as I have hinted, even how they ought to spend their income, which is received directly from the sponsor. While it would be too ambitious for my paper to attempt to demarcate exactly which decisions sponsors should or should not exert influence over, it is enough to note that even the most benevolent of sponsors may routinely infantilise the refugee through their well-meaning interventions. As the above passage demonstrates, the refugee may find it also difficult to protest against infantilising treatment because of the narratives of gratitude they feel compelled to adopt.

**5. Conclusion**

Given the gravity of the global refugee crisis, there is little doubt that the introduction of private refugee sponsorship programs is a welcome addition to current refugee admission efforts. Aside from creating more room for refugee admission, the social and emotional bonds they cultivate between refugees and sponsors make private sponsorship particularly worth preserving. However, as I have tried to show, the potential for these close relationships comes at a price: the lack of relationship boundaries may, on the flip side, may harm the social equality of refugees. For this reason, states should be willing to introduce policy changes that would help to protect refugees against these unintended ill-effects. I conclude my discussion by making four concrete suggestions.

Firstly, states should disentangle financial support from social or emotional forms of support. That is, the sponsors responsible for providing refugees with financial support should not be the same people who help them navigate their everyday lives. Instead, financial support from sponsors ought to be randomly distributed directly to the refugee. This would significantly lessen the possibility of domination, as the sponsors who regularly interact with refugees would not be able to threaten to withhold funds from them.

Secondly, we should support non-governmental organisations that refugees can confidentially and informally turn to for support, should they find themselves in situations where they are uncomfortable with the sponsor’s exercises of power. Relatedly, refugees should be strongly assured that seeking out support from NGOs will have no impact on their right to stay or their right to receive support.

Thirdly, mediating officers responsible for resolving sponsor-refugee conflicts or determining who is at fault in a sponsorship breakdown must be trained to identify dominating and infantilising behaviour displayed by sponsors, even if it falls short of more conventional definitions of unreasonableness or abuse.

Lastly, compulsory training must be provided for all sponsors in order to underscore the importance of balanced power dynamics in the sponsor-refugee relationship and teach them how to avoid disrupting those, such as through offering guidelines on how to negotiate difficult issues.

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1. . Following the more capacious definition contained in the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Convention, the persons I refer to as ‘refugees’ are not only those who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, are outside the country of nationality and are unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country’, but also those who ‘owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of the country of [their] origin or nationality, [are] compelled to leave [their] place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place’. Furthermore, I define as ‘refugees’ those whose circumstances match the above criteria, even if they have not been granted formal refugee status by the UNCHR or a receiving state. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . I intentionally leave open the *source* of such duties. As Carens (2015) writes, moral obligations to resettle refugees may be grounded in causal connection, duties of humanity, or responsibility conferred on actors who uphold the modern state system. My goal is not to provide an argument for *why* states have obligations to resettle refugees, but rather, assuming the presence of these obligations, to assess how far private sponsorship programs go in discharging those, and whether they do so through permissible means. Nor do I comment on the *scope* of such duties: I make no claims about how many refugees states ought to resettle, and what costs states can be reasonably expected to bear. Instead, I simply assume that the subjects of my paper – that is, those refugees being resettled under private sponsorship programs – have a moral entitlement to be resettled by the state in question. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . I also leave open the question of what qualifies a refugee for resettlement, rather than temporary admission, once they have been admitted. I take it that states can admit refugees, in order to protect their basic human rights, without necessarily intending to resettle them. However, it is worth emphasising two points. Firstly, it is cruel for receiving states to keep refugees in a protracted state of alienage that blocks them from living minimally decent lives (e.g. by barring them from seeking work or renting properties), even if their basic human rights are successfully protected. Secondly, it is also cruel to repatriate refugees who have been territorially present for a certain amount of time, even if doing so would not violate the principle of non-refoulement, because it disrupts and severs attachments they have made in the receiving state. These two considerations alone, I believe, mean that receiving states are morally obliged to resettle refugees who have been present for some time, and they must be prepared for all admitted refugees to become eligible for resettlement. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . See <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/private-sponsorship-refugee-resettlement-united-states> and <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/welcoming-engagement-how-private-sponsorship-can-strengthen-refugee-resettlement-european> for reports encouraging the implementation of private sponsorship in the USA and EU. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . See, for example, Young (2011) and Anderson (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Of course, we may even choose to terminate professional relationships in order to pursue personal ones. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . I exclude from my discussion the state’s exercise of power, or agents of the state exercising their power over me, as I agree that these may be justified for reasons other than consent. Here, I have in mind the power of non-state agents in professional contexts (e.g. doctors, lawyers, teachers, therapists). Of course, the power of state agents may also be limited by my consent even if their power is not, at base, justified by it. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . I follow Pettit’s (1997) definition of what constitutes a dominating relationship. According to Pettit, there are three basic aspects to any dominating relationship; someone has dominating power over another to the degree that they have the capacity to interfere, on an arbitrary basis, in particular choices that the other is able to exercise. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . See, for example, Dina Nayeri’s reflections on the ‘gratefulness’ she and her family were expected to express after seeking refuge in the USA. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . I adapt this definition from Sangiovanni (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . In this example, I assume the patient is an adult with typical cognitive capacities. I exclude from my discussion cases where adults’ judgment may be heavily compromised, or cases where children may permissibly receive medical interventions against their own, or their parents’ will. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)