

Settlement Experiences of Somali Refugee Women in Toronto

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Qaxootiga Kanada
Waxaa tirisay Xaawa Jibriil

Qaxootiga Kanada dhakhso waa u qaabishaa
Lamana qadiyee waxbaa loo qotshaynayaa
Qanaacad ma laha lacagtaannu qaadannaa
Qawtalyoonka iyo guryohooda qaaligaa
Markii loo qaybasho jeebkaagi baa qallalan
Ummad qalaad weeyw oo qaarba meel ka yimid
Salaan kaa qaadahayn oodan la qabsan karin
Qofkaad aragtaaba albaab buu qafilanayaa
Waa qaloodaayoo cidladu waa wax lagu qandhado ee
Qadiyadaydiiyo qarankaan u heesi jirey
Africa quruxdeedi haddaan ka qaawanahay

Refugees in Canada

Composed by Hawa Jibril and translated by Faduma A. Alim

Indeed Canadians welcome refugees
And do not let them starve
Yet one is always unsatisfied and broke
For the little we get
Hardly suffices our food and shelter.
They are strange people coming from everywhere
Never notice you or even greet you
Each one keeps to himself
Always hastily locking his door.
I feel isolated and sick with loneliness
Deprived from my beautiful Africa
And the land of my inspirations and songs.
I must be contended with the fate
That my God has reserved for me.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we describe a qualitative research project that explored the perspectives of Somali refugee women on their resettlement in Toronto and considered aspects of their integration into Canadian society. Integration is a multidimensional construct dealing with complex interrelated processes pertaining to societal participation -- that is, the ways in which migrants become part of the social, cultural, economic, and political spheres of the country of resettlement (Valtonen, 1999). This paper, however, focuses primarily on the social and cultural aspects of this phenomenon.

Integration is frequently described in terms of continuity versus change, continuity being synonymous with socio-cultural retention and change with integration (Remennick, 1999). For our study we adopted a framework proposed by Berry and Sam (1997) that views continuity and change as complimentary, rather than competing, processes. This framework considers retention of socio-cultural identity and the concomitant establishment of ties with the dominant society as joint criteria for successful integration.

A variety of factors influence the integration process. One is the distance between the home and the host culture; the greater the cultural gap between the refugee and the country of relocation, the more difficult the integration process (Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1987). Another determinant is generational status; “multinational studies in diverse immigrant communities ... indicate that the first generation of adult migrants largely preserve the features of culture and lifestyle of their country of origin” (Remennick, 1999, p. 65); it is the second generation that more readily accepts the norms and cultural practices of the country of resettlement. The extent of migrants’ participation in mainstream culture also depends on structural factors within the society, including social and economic conditions and public policies that support their efforts in this direction (Edmonston & Passel, 1994).

Background

Refugee women leave their homelands under great duress, usually as a result of war, severe political or economic upheaval, or religious or ethnic persecution. They arrive in the host country after having endured the indignities and horrors of flight and, for some, prolonged stays in refugee camps. Refugee women are not able to plan their migration in advance; consequently, they arrive in a host country unprepared for what they may encounter there. In addition, they must cope with the trauma associated with sudden separation from, or loss of, family along with the challenges of integration into the country of resettlement. The dimensions of race, gender and the forms of patriarchy in their home and host countries compound their situation.

Since the 1991 upheaval in Somalia, a large number of Somalis, many of them refugee women and children, have migrated to Canada. Most live in the province of Ontario, with about 75,000 in the Greater Toronto Area (Somali Immigrant Aid Organization, personal communication, March 10, 1999). Somalis are among the most

disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities in Canada (Opoku-Dapaah, 1995). Those living in Ontario have been seriously affected by the dramatic changes in social policy instituted since the Progressive Conservatives took office in 1995. These changes included a 21% reduction in social assistance payments, elimination of rent controls, and institution of co-payment for prescription drugs. These and other reductions in services and benefits constitute a significant hardship for Somali families already relying on social assistance.

The role of women in Somali culture. Somalia is a patriarchal society with its roots in Islam. The basis of Somali social structure is the clan-family system, which is traced through patrilineal descent. Social identity in Somalia is tied to clan differentiation rather than race and religion. Thus racial and religious categories are not part of the social meaning and everyday interactions in Somali culture.

Islamic teachings pervade the consciousness of Somalis, providing guidance in most aspects of daily living, including roles and expectations for men and women. Women are generally regarded as subordinate to men; their primary role is to care for husbands, children and members of their extended families. Historically, Somali women did not have access to education and work outside the home. However, after the Latin script for the writing of the Somali language was instituted in 1972 (Abdi, 1998; Sheikh-Abdi, 1981), more and more Somali women began to attend school. During this same period, an increasing number of women began to work outside the home, some in business and professional positions.

When the Somali state collapsed, the husbands of many Somali women were killed in the fighting or stayed behind when families fled the country. As a result, a large number of the women became widows and/or heads of households. With children to care for and without the support of their husbands and extended families, they had to make the transition from dependence to independence in a very short period of time (Osaki, 1997).

Somali women and identity documents. When Somali women fled the country, many did not take their identity documents with them because of frantic departures, banditry, and interfactional fighting. Other women were able to take their documents, only to have the authenticity of these papers questioned by immigration officials. And because of conditions back in Somalia, there was no longer a centralized government office from which they could request new documents or have existing ones verified.

This situation caused problems for the many Somalis who sought refuge in Canada, where identity documents are normally required for refugees seeking to become landed immigrants (i.e., permanent residents). Because so many Somali refugees could not produce documents deemed satisfactory by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian government adopted an amendment to the Immigration Act that created a new category of refugees without identity documents: the Undocumented Convention Refugees in Canada Class (UCRCC). Since January of 1997, when the regulation took effect, undocumented refugees from Somalia have been required to wait for five years after refugee determination before proceeding with applications for permanent residency (CIC, 1997). This means it is often seven or more years before they become permanent residents, as the refugee determination process itself can take a year or more and, “the landing process at the end of the waiting period can take up to another year or more” (Brouwer, 1999, p. 15).

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the purpose of the UCRCC regulation was “to provide a disincentive to undocumented arrivals who were perceived as ... posing a potential security threat” (Brouwer, 1999, p. 10). It is the position of the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR) (1998), however, that the regulation is “experienced and perceived as racist” (p. 57). Moreover, it discriminates particularly against women and children because they are less likely than men to have identity documents (CCR, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

The first and second authors worked collaboratively with representatives of two Somali community organizations to plan the research design and develop strategies for recruiting participants. As white, middle-class university-based researchers, it was our goal to be mindful of the power relations inherent in the research process and to critically reflect on how our views influenced the way the research was conceptualized and carried out. Our awareness of these power differentials by no means equalized relationships; however, we attempted to adopt an approach that prioritized the knowledge and experience of our Somali partners (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). They provided valuable insights and we revised the method, interpretations of the data, and the substance of this presentation in response to their suggestions. A planner from a local social planning council facilitated this process.

The two community partner organizations helped us recruit the 21 women who participated in the study. Nineteen were undocumented refugees and two had recently become permanent residents. The women immigrated to Canada between 1990 and 1997, most by way of refugee camps in Kenya. They were all from cities and towns in the southern part of the country, with 17 from Mogadishu. Ten women were married and three of them had husbands living overseas. Four were widowed and two were divorced. Among them, the women had a total of 56 children, some in Toronto and some overseas. Their education ranged from none to completion of university. More than half the women had attended elementary school only. In Somalia, eight women had worked outside the home: four in professional positions. In Canada, all were on social assistance. Only a few of the women were fluent in English and lack of English-language proficiency was a serious concern to them.

The qualitative research design entailed three focus group sessions conducted in

Somali. The group facilitators were two women who were highly respected in the community. Their participation created an environment of trust and ensured that the focus group protocols followed accepted Somali cultural practices. Two Somali research assistants audiotaped the focus group sessions and recorded field notes. The audiotapes were later transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

We analyzed English translations of the interview transcripts using commonly accepted procedures for qualitative analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). After the initial data analysis was completed, the Somali facilitators and participants provided feedback on the preliminary results. Their comments were considered as we developed the findings we now present in the following three categories: 1) Consequences of Undocumented Somali Refugee Status, 2) The Welfare of Somali Children, and 3) Housing.

FINDINGS

Consequences of Undocumented Somali Refugee Status

In Canada, the rights and privileges of all refugees are restricted in a number of ways. The problem for undocumented Somali refugees is that the restrictions remain in place for at least five years. This prolonged period of limitations on rights and privileges poses serious problems. The women in our study discussed four topics related to their refugee status: restrictions on family reunification and mobility access to postsecondary education, access to employment and their perspectives on the regulations.

Restrictions on Family Reunification and Mobility

In Somalia, the women were accustomed to living amongst their extended families. When they fled the country, however, their families were torn apart. Two-thirds of the women in our study had children, husbands, and mothers and fathers living

overseas, many still in refugee camps. Refugees in Canada are prohibited from sponsoring family members until they have become landed immigrants. This regulation was very distressing to the women, because they knew they would have to wait at least five years before they could reunite with family members.

Refugees are also not eligible for Canadian travel documents. If they leave Canada for any reason, they are not allowed to return. This means they may not visit family members living in other countries. In times of family emergency, Canadian Immigration sometimes makes exceptions for refugees with acceptable identity documents, but this option is not open to undocumented Somali refugees. They are not even allowed to travel overseas to visit a relative who is seriously ill or attend a funeral for a relative who has passed away. The following story was a typical one:

The greatest problem I am facing is that three of my own children are in Kenya. ... I am four years in Canada ...and for four years I haven't seen my children. ... If I could have [my landed immigrant] document I could have visited them or sponsored them so that they could have joined me. My biggest disappointment is that I cannot sponsor my children.

Restrictions on Access to Postsecondary Education

Refugees are guaranteed full access to elementary and secondary education by federal law. Postsecondary education is different, and each province decides on its own tuition fees. In Ontario, refugees are expected to pay the same high fees as foreign students. They are also not eligible for educational loans and scholarships. Therefore, most are cut off from postsecondary education. One of the women expressed her frustration with these restrictive policies:

Canada has recognized us as refugees, given us food and shelter and tried her best to assist us, but at the same time she has deprived us from what we need the most --- education. Our future depends on education.

Restrictions on Access to Employment

Refugees can only get temporary work permits. This makes them ineligible for

some jobs. Even when they are eligible, many employers are still reluctant to hire them. One woman said she was hired for a housekeeping job, and fired when her employer found out she was a refugee. "The lady asked me, 'If you don't have your landed papers, how can I trust you?'"

Refugees are not eligible for bank loans. This makes it difficult for them to start up businesses. A woman who had been in business in Somalia explained:
If I had the proper documents and a loan to open my own business, I could be an independent person. They [Immigration officials] told me to stay at home and wait for the \$500 [welfare] cheque. That is not what I came here for.

Because of the restrictions on education and work, the few women who had professional careers in Somalia could not get work in their fields or upgrade their skills. One woman in this situation described her frustration:
I am a professional nurse with 12 years of work experience. Since I came to Canada, I find myself absolutely denied the opportunity to work in my profession or to go to college and continue my education.

Women's Perspectives

The women were perplexed by the change in policy that occurred in 1997, when the five-year waiting period for undocumented Somali refugees came into effect. One woman shared her disillusionment with life in Canada:

Before we came to this country, we used to work and manage our lives like any other human beings. Now, we are not allowed to work, to struggle for the well being of our children, to get access to education, and to get loans. Why did they welcome us to their country with open arms only to make life more miserable for us?

A number of the women attributed their treatment to religious and racial prejudice. Most agreed with one woman, who said that, before migrating to Canada, she had heard it was a country with no racism. She told us how her views had changed: "When I look at how things are going, I realize that a powerful form of racism

exists.”

Recommendations

The Canadian Government has proposed a reduction in the waiting period for refugees without identity documents from five years to three (CIC, 1998). The Canadian Council of Refugees (1999) argues, however, that simply reducing the waiting period does not solve the problem. It is their recommendation that it be dropped altogether. This is what the women in our study asked for as well.

The Welfare of Somali Children

Somali women place their hopes for the future in their children. Therefore, their children's welfare in Canada is a critical issue. The women in our study voiced concerns about education, cultural norms and differences in childrearing practices.

Concerns About Education

Somali children are faced with insurmountable problems in Toronto schools. Many have had little education because of the upheaval in Somalia and the time spent in refugee camps. When they arrive in Toronto, they are placed in classes that, although age appropriate, may be too difficult academically.

Lack of English language proficiency is another problem. One mother explained:

Even if the child has a good educational background, with a strong base in math and other subjects, still he wouldn't be able to follow along in class because of the language. Language is the key factor, and it is only when the child has a strong language base that he can catch up to his classmates. It is of no help for him to throw him in a class without giving him any support.

This issue is complicated by the fact that many Somali parents also face the same language barrier and cannot provide the needed educational support at home.

Another problem was teacher and student bias against Somali children's religion, races, and style of dress. A woman in our study shared her view:

When I send my little girl to school wearing our Islamic dress, teachers and students make negative comments about her dress, they are showing intolerance.

Other difficulties were related to differences in cultural norms and expectations between Somali and Canadian schools. Certain behaviours that are acceptable in Canadian schools are unacceptable in Somali schools. Likewise, behaviours that are rewarded in Somali schools may be viewed negatively here. One of the women explained how her six-year-old daughter, who is shy and quiet, was seen by her Canadian teacher and her Islamic teacher:

Her [Canadian] teacher always tells me that the girl doesn't talk, that she is too shy, and that she has no energy. On the other hand, the Islamic teacher that I send her to on Saturdays and Sundays is full of praise for her, telling me what a quiet and kind girl she is. ... I don't know what to think.

Although the women had many concerns about their children's schooling, they were not comfortable discussing them with teachers largely because of their lack of English proficiency. In addition, they said that when they tried to ask questions or make comments, teachers gave quick answers or ignored them.

Cultural Norms and Differences in Childrearing Practices

The women raised issues about the negative influences of contemporary culture on their children. They were uncomfortable with some of the behaviours their children had developed since their arrival in Canada. One mother gave this example: They [our children] use bad words, for example, and sometimes they make bad gestures. These are bad things that are accepted here, but according to our religion, they are considered to be very shameful.

Cultural differences in disciplinary practices formed another major topic of discussion. Somalis strongly believe that children need discipline to learn respect, good manners, and good behaviour. The women in our study were aware that some common methods of discipline in Somali culture, such as spankings, are not acceptable in Canada. One woman described how teachers and other authority

figures might misinterpret spankings as abuse:

If a child [goes to school] with a bruise he is asked, "What is that thing and who did it to you?" The child could have hurt himself while playing, but all the same they ask him, "Did your mother do that to you? What does your father do to you?"

In school, children are instructed to call 911 if they believe they are being verbally or physically abused. This threat of a 911-phone call has become a weapon for Somali children to hold over their parents. Some women said that their children were becoming arrogant and disrespectful because of this. They also worried that the Children's Aid Society might take their children away.

The women were concerned about their teenage children, who had graduated from high school, but were unable to enrol in postsecondary programs or get jobs. Without school or work to keep them occupied, many spent their days in local hangouts, and their mothers worried that they might be drawn to drug and alcohol use. One woman, who had two teenage children with her in Toronto and two in a refugee camp in Kenya spoke of the similarities in their situations:

I and two of my children are here and the other two are in Kenya. The two children who are with me have finished high school; they are not landed so they can't apply for a college. For the other two, I am not landed and I cannot sponsor them. They are in Kenya without doing anything, just wandering about. And these two [in Toronto] also are standing by, doing nothing.

Finally, the women recognized that their roles and influence as parents were changing, as their children became more a part of Canadian culture. They worried that some children might abandon their Somali culture heritage altogether.

Recommendations

The women had three recommendations to improve schooling for Somali students and address issues in cultural differences:

That the public schools initiate tutoring programs and homework clubs to help Somali students achieve to their potential.

That the Somali community establish separate schools where Somali children would be taught the Islamic religion, and traditional behaviour and cultural practices in addition to their regular academic program.

That community organizations sponsor educational and recreational programs to help Somali children and youth deal with Canadian schools and Canadian culture while preserving Somali culture, religion and social practices.

Housing

Somali refugees in Toronto live for the most part in high-rise apartment buildings, many in public housing or subsidized units. Their dwellings are frequently overcrowded, with large groupings of nuclear and extended family members occupying the same living space. This arrangement helps families on welfare maintain rental costs at affordable levels. In addition, it reproduces the cultural preferences of Somalis for living amongst their extended families. The women discussed three issues related to housing: difficulties in finding affordable housing, difficulties in managing housing costs and other basic needs, and the quality of life in high-rise apartments.

Finding Affordable Housing

The shortage of affordable rental units in Toronto made finding suitable housing a major problem. Six to eight-year waiting lists for subsidized housing and complicated rental application forms that had to be filled out in English posed additional barriers.

The women reported numerous incidents of landlord bias against Somalis. One woman said that a landlord would not permit her to rent a one-bedroom apartment for herself and her teenaged son, citing the possibility of incest as the reason. Another reported the following:

Sometimes you go to rent an apartment that through the telephone you were assured to be vacant. When they see that you are a Somali, you are told that it has already been rented.

Housing Costs and Other Basic Needs

With increases in rent and the 21% decrease in social assistance payments, the women sometimes ended up paying out as much as 80% of their total monthly income for housing. This left them with little money for other basic necessities such as food and medicine. Most of the women were distressed by the fact that they could not afford to buy hallal meat or other culturally familiar foods for their families. Some said they often went hungry so their children could eat. They also worried about the effect of poor nutrition on their children's health and ability to learn.

With budgets so tight and the increase in fees for prescription medicines, the women expressed concern about their ability to provide their children with adequate medical care. One woman said:

Sometimes I pray to God not to bring us disease, and ask him that my child does not become sick, even not to get the flu, because some of the drugs are very expensive and are not covered. ... The month your child does not become sick is your happiest month.

Quality of Life in High-Rises

The women were having difficulty adjusting to high-rise apartment living. This is a housing arrangement that differed significantly from their single-family homes with spacious courtyards in Somalia. One problem was that many of the buildings were poorly maintained, with paper-thin walls, no carpeting, and landlords unwilling to make needed repairs.

The women had many fears about living in high-rise apartment buildings. One was that they would be unable to exit the building quickly in case of fire or another emergency. Another was that if they kept their apartment windows open, young children might fall out. To prevent this from happening, most of the women only opened their windows at night when the children were asleep. The women's greatest

fear in living in high-rises was for the safety of their children, not only inside the buildings, but also in the common areas surrounding them. One woman reflected on child safety in Somalia as compared to Canada.

Before the war, when we were in Somalia, we would open the doors for our children to play outside; nobody would take them away or molest them. Now we must be on the watch out for 24 hours. If you close your eyes just for a second your child is gone and you will never see him again.

The necessity of using elevators in their high-rise apartment buildings was yet another problem. The women said that some older Somalis frequently got lost and confused while trying to use the elevators. Other Somalis, both old and young, were afraid they might become trapped in a broken elevator and die of suffocation.

The women said that, while riding the elevator, non-Somali neighbours sometimes harassed them with rude comments. One described the religious conflict created by having to share elevators with the pet dogs of these neighbours:

The elevator is a dreadful thing. People will not keep their dogs away from you. Sometimes they purposely let them touch you. Dogs are God's creatures, and we have nothing against them, but our religion prohibits us to touch them for they are impure.

Cramped living quarters, poorly maintained apartments, and fears about safety were contributing to increased physical and mental health problems for the women and their families. These poor living conditions coupled with poor relations with non-Somali neighbours led several women to describe their high-rise apartment homes as "prison cells" or "living in hell."

Recommendations

Somalis as well as other immigrants and refugees tend to have larger nuclear families than Canadians do and prefer to live with their extended families; however, these cultural differences have not been reflected in housing policy. It is important to

plan for families whose configurations or compositions differ from that of the Canadian nuclear family model. Such housing alternatives must be available to all sectors of the population including people on limited incomes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The women said they were grateful to the Canadian government for accepting them as refugees. They were relieved to have left behind a culture of war for food, shelter, and safety. Nevertheless, everyday life was very stressful for them, and feelings of anxiety, depression, and extreme nervousness were common. Somali refugee women in other studies (Buckland, 1997; Buchanan, 1996; Ruff, 1998) struggled with similar feelings as they tried to build a new life in Canada.

Some of the women were still feeling the effects of stress due to the trauma of the war in Somalia, their flight out of the country, and their detention in refugee camps before their arrival in Canada. Many were grieving over the break up of their families and their inability to reunite with them. The stress of being in Canada while husbands, children, or parents were still overseas was a difficult burden for them to bear. Valtonen (1999) points out that “separation in the family unit of involuntary migrants profoundly disturbs the most basic relationship network” (Valtonen, 1999, p. 37). Results of other studies indicate that prolonged waits for family reunification, such as the women in our study were experiencing, are detrimental to the integration process (Ruff, 1998; Valtonen, 1999).

Another factor that weighed on the women was the loss of their homes, culture, country, lifestyle, friends, and family, and their need to mourn these losses. Espn (1999) explains:

Regardless of gratitude for their new country and relief from whatever anxieties were experienced in the home country, the transitions created by immigration demand that one grieves for the old attachments to country and people. (p. 30)

Juxtaposed with this grieving process were the stresses of learning a new language and adapting to a culture with values that were, in some instances, in direct conflict with traditional Muslim values, attitudes and norms. The women's difficulties in reconciling these contradictions demonstrate the importance of the distance between the home and host cultures as a determinant of successful or unsuccessful integration (Berry et al., 1987).

Difficulties with English and problems with intercultural communication disadvantaged the women in their dealings with government officials, teachers, and landlords. Problems such as unemployment and constant worries about the well being of their families were other significant factors. More than half the women were functioning as single parents and responsibilities for family finances and decision-making rested on their shoulders for perhaps the first time in their lives. One woman said many Somali women felt worthless primarily because they could not adequately provide for their families. Yet, poor English proficiency, the restrictions on postsecondary education and limited employment opportunities made it hard for the women to get jobs and integrate into the economic sphere.

Although an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and disillusionment pervaded the group, the women said their strong faith in their religion lifted their spirits. Another source of support was the Somali community, with its many ethno-specific organizations offering services to resettling migrants as well as opportunities for maintenance of cultural identity.

Integrating into a society where people are identified by racial and religious categories was problematic, especially when the women recognized that discrimination based on these categories permeated many aspects of their lives. The women's reports of racial and religious prejudice support the experiences of Somali refugees in other Canadian studies (Buchanan, 1996; Buckland, 1997; Grover, 1995; Ighodaro, 1997, Kusow, 1998; Opoku-Dapaah, 1995; Ruff, 1998).

Kusow (1998) suggests that some Somalis react to discrimination and the resultant devaluation of their status by limiting their interactions primarily to the Somali community. This strategy, he argues, allows them to maintain the identities they established in their homeland rather than accept the racialized identities available to them in Canada. An alternative explanation is that Somalis do wish to participate in the larger society, but they are hindered by structural factors that do not support their efforts in this direction. Our results regarding the impact of the five-year waiting period on undocumented Somali refugees favours this explanation. These findings show that the prolonged constraints imposed on the women because of their problems with identity documents limited their ability to integrate into the mainstream of Canadian life, despite their expressed desire to do so. One woman summarized the predicament:

Without “the law,” I have no voice. Without “the law,” I cannot get a job or continue my education. ... Because of all these problems, I feel frustrated and sick. ... I got the malady that these people [Canadians] call stress, but that we call heartbreak.

Successful integration is dependent not only on the individual, but also on public policies that facilitate refugees’ societal participation (Padilla, 1997). This is a particularly important consideration for Somali women, who are triply marginalized by their race, gender and newcomer status (Boyd, 1984; Gibbs, 1996; Remennick, 1999).

Recommendations

Eliminate the five-year waiting period for undocumented Somali refugees.

2. Develop educational programs and services to meet the needs of Somali students and their families.
3. Increase access to affordable and culturally appropriate housing.
4. Establish adequate social assistance programs.
5. Address issues of racial and religious discrimination and their effect on Somali women refugees and their families.

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