Waiting for "Sharciga"
Resettlement and the Roles

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Cette étude qualitative a examiné l'impact de la réinsertion de 21 réfugiées somaliennes qui vivent à Toronto et relate l'effet négatif de cette réinsertion sur l'habilité de ces femmes à remplir leur rôle dans la sphère domestique et auprès de leurs enfants ainsi que leur rôle social dans le domaine de l'éducation et du travail.

Refugee women who flee to the West from third world countries typically move from traditional, patriarchal, family-centred cultures to technological, democratic, and individualistic societies (Lipson and Miller). Their resettlement in host countries so different from their own may bring about a variety of social and economic changes, including the altering of roles in both the private sphere of home and family as well as the public sphere of education and work (Kay). A review of recent research suggests that the effects of resettlement on women's roles are complex and varied. Women who functioned primarily in the private sphere in their native land typically maintain this role in the host country, although often in a more restricted way. Women with roles in the public sphere, especially those with professional careers, often suffer a loss of prestige and self-esteem as they find themselves unable to get jobs commensurate with their training and experience. Despite these negative trends, there are some women who actually better their positions in the host country, as opportunities for self-improvement become available (DeVoe; Kay; Koenig; Sales and Gregory).

In this article, we report on the impact of resettlement on the roles of Somali refugee women. Somalis constitute the largest group of African refugees in Canada and are among its most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities (Affi 1997a; Opoku-Dapaah). Most Somali refugees live in Ontario, with about 75,000 in the Greater Toronto Area (Somali Immigrant Aid Organization). Somali refugees use the word *sharciga,* meaning "the law," to refer to the process of being approved as permanent residents, or landed immigrants, in Canada. Our goals are to: (1) explore the private and public roles of Somali women awaiting *sharciga*; (2) compare those roles to the ones they carried in their homeland; and (3) consider how their roles have been altered as a result of current Canadian immigration regulations.

Women with professional careers, often suffer a loss self-esteem as they find themselves unable to get jobs commensurate with their training and experience.

Our article draws on data collected for a larger qualitative research project that investigated more generally the experiences of Somali refugee women in Toronto. For this project, the first and second authors, both white middle-class, university women, worked collaboratively with representatives of two Somali community organizations to plan the research. It was our goal to be mindful of the power relations inherent in this process and to critically reflect on how our views influenced the way the project was conceptualized and carried out. We tried to adopt an approach that prioritized the knowledge and experience of out Somali partners (Maynard and Purvis). They provided valuable insights, and we revised the methodology and reconsidered our analysis and interpretation of the data in response to their suggestions. Nevertheless, we recognize that our awareness of the power differentials, and the steps we took to mitigate them, by no means equalized relationships.

We were also concerned about essentializing the participants and their experiences, through the use of terminology such as "woman," "refugee," "African," "Somali," and "Muslim." Although these terms may reify Somali refugees women as a singular group oppressed by their gender, migrant status, race, nationality, history, and religion (Bestman; Parpart), we realized that some use of categories would be necessary to represent the women, their lives in Somalia, and their experiences in Toronto. We tried to mitigate these effects by involving women as much as possible in the research process and by using their words in the form of direct quotations to illustrate the findings. Spivak points out that essentialism is sometimes a necessary part of one's work. The critique of essentialism should be "understood not as

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an exposure to error ... but as an acknowledgement of the dangerousness of something one cannot not use" (5).

The roles of women in Somali culture

Somalia is located north of the equator in an area referred to as the Horn of Africa. Most of its population "comes from one ethnic group, shares one culture, speaks one language, and believes in one religion" (Affi 1997b: 1). The basis of Somali social structure is the clan-family system, which is traced through patrilineal descent. Kinship ties among Somalis are extensive. "When Somalis talk about their families, they are often referring to the extended family that goes beyond the nuclear family of spouse and children" (Opoku-Dapaah 14).

Somalia is a patriarchal society with roots in Islamic custom and tradition. "For Muslims, their religion is their way of life" (Stuckey 278), and Islam has much to say about the traditional role expectations and conduct of women. In Islamic cultures such as Somalia, the primary role of women is to care for home and family. They are regarded as subordinate to men, and gender-linked behaviours such as passivity and submissiveness are expected. Indeed, "the ideal woman is the silent woman whose words and ideas are limited to her immediate circle of children and other women" (Keynan 1). Men are expected to be the providers and decision-makers.

The subjugation of women is rationalized in many types of discourse, including the patriarchal poetry, proverbs, and folk tales that constitute much of Somalia's oral literature tradition. The view that intelligence and motherhood are incompatible, for instance, is shown in the following proverb: "A breast that contains milk cannot contain wisdom" (Keynan).

Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, civil war, famine, and a subsequent refugee exodus also helped change Somali women's traditional role.

Traditionally, Somali women were not permitted access to education and work. Starting in the 1960s, however, women became more active in the public sphere and, since then, their roles have been progressively changing. Subsequent to the institution of the Latin script for the writing of the Somali language in 1972 (Abdi; Sheikh-Abdi), more and more Somali women began to attend school, some graduating from post-secondary institutions in Somalia or abroad. During this same period, an increasing number of women began to work outside the home, some in business and professional positions, although they were still expected to maintain their domestic responsibilities. Most managed home and careers by relying on members of their extended families for assistance with child care and other household tasks. Kay, in her study of Chilean refugees, called women such as these "public-private" women because of their roles in both the public and private domains (109).

Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 (when rebel forces ousted long-time dictator Mohamed Siad Barre), civil war, famine, and a subsequent refugee exodus also helped change Somali women's traditional role. Many husbands were killed in the fighting or were left behind when families fled the country. As a result, a large number of Somali refugee women became widows and/or heads of households. With children to care for and without the protection of their husbands and extended families, they, like refugee women from other countries, had to make the transition from dependence to independence in a very short period of time (Osaki). Some Somali women living with their husbands in exile also began to negotiate new roles that altered the balance of power in the family (Affi 1997a; Sales and Gregory).

Resettlement: from Somalia to Canada

Carved into fiefdoms by battling warlords after the fall of the Barre regime, Somalia continued its descent into anarchy. With the country's political, economic, and social fabric in tatters, large numbers of Somalis sought refuge in other countries, including Canada. Many did not have identity or travel docu-

ments, particularly Somali women because of their lower status, and Somalis from rural areas, where documents were not typically available or needed. For those who had documents, other factors came into play—frantic departures, banditry, and inter-factional fighting—in relieving them of their papers (CCR 1996). And once they arrived in their country of resettlement, there was no government office from which to request such papers. Huda[1] a refugee mother now living in Toronto, recounted her experience:

> *The day the war broke out in Mogadishu [capital of Somalia], we [Huda and her husband] were in different parts of the city and we fled in different directions. First I went to Yemen; then I came here with my two little children. I fled my country with a bullet in an arm and I arrived at Toronto airport while I was seven months pregnant. At the airport, they asked me for documents and I told them that, when I was fleeing, I didn't have time to collect any documents, or even get for my baby his bottle of milk.*

This situation caused problems for the many Somalis who arrived in Canada, where identity documents are normally required for refugees seeking to become permanent residents. Because so many Somali (and Afghani) 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).[2] Since January of 1997, when the regulation took effect, undocumented refugees from Somalia (and Afghanistan) have been required to wait for five years after refugee determination before proceeding with applications to become permanent residents (CIC 1997). This waiting period discriminates particularly against women and children because they are less likely than men to have identity documents (CCR 1999).

In Canada, the rights and privileges of refugees are limited in a variety of ways. Although "family reunification is the main concern of most refugees" (Brouwer 6), they are not permitted to sponsor the immigration of family members until they have become permanent residents. Refugees also are not allowed to travel outside Canada; since they are not eligible for Canadian travel documents, they cannot count on re-entry once they have left the country. Although exceptions on compassionate grounds are sometimes made for refugees with acceptable identity documents, this option is not open to undocumented refugees. Thus, they may not even travel overseas for family emergencies.

> **"I fled my country with a bullet in an arm and I arrived at Toronto airport while I was seven months pregnant. When I was fleeing, I didn't have time to even get for my baby his bottle of milk."**

Refugees are restricted in their access to education and employment. Costly tuition fees for non-residents make post-secondary education prohibitive, and refugees are not eligible for educational loans and scholarships. Banks are unwilling to give business loans to refugees. And how many employers are willing to provide a decent job to a person with only a temporary work permit?

Undocumented refugees must live under these restrictions for at least five years before proceeding with applications for landed status. This prolonged state of "legal limbo" creates additional barriers to resettlement that may be difficult to overcome (Brouwer; CCR 1996).

A government report released in January of 1999 proposed a reduction in the waiting period for undocumented refugees from five years to three (CIC 1998). The Canadian Council for Refugees (1999) argues, however, that simply reducing the waiting period does not solve the problem. They recommend that the regulation requiring identity documents of refugees seeking permanent residence be dropped altogether.

Overview of study

Two Somali community organizations helped us recruit the 21 women who took part in our study. Of this group, 19 were undocumented refugees (two had recently become permanent residents). Although a number of the women were hesitant to provide personal data because of their uncertain status, we were able to glean the following information: The women immigrated to Canada between 1990 and 1997, most by way of refugee camps in Kenya. They came from cities or towns in the southern part of the country, with 17 from Mogadishu. Eleven had attended elementary school only, and five had attended high school. Two had completed post-secondary training programs; two had completed university; and one had no schooling at all. Eight women had worked outside the home: four in professional positions, and four in other jobs. The women had experienced a sharp decrease in their standard of living since becoming refugees, and all were currently on social assistance.

Ten of the women were married, and three of them had husbands living overseas. The others were single, divorced, or widowed. The

women had a total of 56 children among them, some in Toronto and some overseas.

The women participated in three group interviews, conducted in Somali. For the first session, all 21 met together to identify major topics of concern. For the second and third sessions, they met in two smaller groups for in-depth discussions. Two Somali women who were highly respected in the community served as the group facilitators. Their participation helped create an environment of trust that encouraged the women to share their perspectives. Somali research assistants audio-taped the interviews and recorded field notes. The facilitators translated the interviews into English, and the translations were used as the basis for the qualitative data analysis.

Private roles: caring for home and family

Restrictions against family reunification and travel outside Canada seriously interfered with the women's ability to fulfil their traditional caring role. In Somalia, the women's primary task was to ensure the well-being of their families. As the social fabric of the country disintegrated, it was typically the women who held their households together. During the flight into exile, however, families were torn apart, and two-thirds of the women in our study had children, husbands, mothers, fathers, and/or other relations living overseas, many still in refugee camps.

Brouwer identifies delayed family reunification as, "the single most painful and damaging aspect of life in legal limbo" (6). The women's anguish about their inability to reunite family members was repeated over and over in the focus group sessions. For example, Laila said: "I have been in Canada for four years and, for four years, I haven't heard from my three children who I had to leave in Kenya." Farida added: "The major difficulties that I face are that my children and my husband are still abroad. It has been difficult for me to endure five years without my children and my husband."

Another painful reality was not being able to visit family members overseas, even in times of serious illness or death. Harcedo, one of the facilitators, said:

> "The major difficulties that I face are that my children and my husband are still abroad. It has been difficult for me to endure five years without my children and my husband."

Today, we were informed that the older brother of my mother died [in Somalia]. My mother didn't get sharciga. Now she is lamenting that she was not able to take part in his burial and that she couldn't visit him while he was still alive.

The economic hardships that the women were suffering also made it difficult for them to carry out their domestic responsibilities. They were living on social assistance in cramped high-rise apartments, much different from the single-family homes with spacious courtyards they were accustomed to in Somalia. The proportionately high cost of rent limited the women's ability to provide their families with food, clothing, and other necessities.

Their social environments were also impoverished, as they were isolated from the kinship networks that formed an integral part of their former lives in their country of origin.

Public roles: education and work

In terms of access to education and work, the restrictions placed on the women as undocumented refugees maintained and reproduced the restrictions placed on them by the patriarchy in their homeland. In Somalia, more than half the women were unable to obtain education beyond the elementary level. In Canada, albeit for a different reason, they were unable to pursue advanced education and/or training.

In Somalia, nearly two-thirds of the women did not work. In Canada, their refugee status closed the door to even low-level positions. Kunab, for instance, said she was offered a housekeeping job, but when her employer found out she was a refugee, the offer was rescinded. Kunab said: "The lady asked me, 'If you don't have your landed papers, how can I trust you?'" Ambara recounted a similar difficulty in finding work as a hotel domestic: "They ask me to come for an interview and, in the interview, they ask for my eligibility. When I show them my temporary work permit, they reject me."

The women were concerned about their children's future without benefit of *sharciga.* Once undocumented Somali refugee youth complete high school, they cannot enroll in post-secondary programs; neither can they get jobs. Without school or work to keep them occupied, many spend their days in local hangouts, much to the consternation of their parents and the community. Hibo, who had two teenage children in a refugee camp in Kenya and two teenage children with her in Toronto, spoke of the similarities in their situations:

They are in Kenya without doing anything other than wandering about, and these two [in Toronto] also stand by, doing nothing. You can see that documents are important. That is why some of our youth are sitting in doughnut shops, because they don't have documents.

The few women who had professional careers in Somalia were unable to maintain these roles in Canada. They were frustrated by the knowledge that even when they became landed immigrants, their lack of Canadian credentials would continue to prevent them from working in positions commensurate with their training and experience. In addition, the break-up of their extended families and the resulting lack of female kin would make home and child care an additional complicating factor. These "public-private" women were feeling the effects of loss of status and self-esteem, and several had become angry and embittered. Talaado said:

What hurts the most is that I have a profession.... I studied law and now there is nothing I can do for myself.... I believe it is wrong and a simple act of enslavement to keep down healthy and youthful human beings and deny them movement and any chance for personal self-development.

Reactions to the five-year waiting period

The women were perplexed by the shift in the treatment of Somali refugees embodied in the 1997 regulation requiring a five-year waiting period for undocumented refugees. Ferhat said:

What I find amazing is that they received us first with open arms and now they are denying us sharciga without any plausible reason. At the beginning [before 1997], they did not deem it necessary, this question of documents; now all of a sudden they are making it a condition.

A number of the women attributed the change in policy to racial and religious prejudice. Most agreed with Kunab, who said that, before immigrating to Canada, she had heard it was a country with no racism. "But now," she said, "when I look at how things are going, I realize that a powerful form of racism exists." These perceptions were in line with Giles, and Opoku-Dapaah, who, as a result of field interviews with 385 Somali refugees in Toronto, concluded that racial discrimination was pervasive, especially against Somali women because of their "distinctive cultural appearance" (70). Sales and Gregory reported similar findings for Somali refugee women in London, England.

Concern was expressed about public perceptions of undocumented Somali refugees who cannot get work. Zienab shared her view:

Every day I hear that the Somalis are said to be people who don't like to work, who want to take welfare only. Welfare is okay for people who are old and cannot work, but our youth love to work and eat what they sweat for. The problem is where is the job? Where are the landing papers and the eligibility to work? Let us have our landing papers and the job offers. After that, see if we don't work.

The women said they were grateful to the Canadian government for accepting them as refugees and giving them a sense of security. They were relieved to have left behind a culture of war for food, shelter, and safety. Nevertheless, similar to other Somali refugees in Canada, they were experiencing a great deal of stress (Affi, 1997a; Opoku-Dapaah); complaints of anxiety and depression were common. Feyrus summed up the women's feelings: "I got the malady that these people [Canadians] call stress, but that we [Somalis] call heartbreak."

Although an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and disillusionment pervaded the group, the women said their strong faith in their religion lifted their spirits. Indeed, the group discussions included many prayers for support and guidance. Harcedo explained: "We believe that whatever happens to us is part of God's will or plan. It is our belief in God that helps us endure, making the unbearable bearable." Another source of support was the women's strong sense of kinship and community.

Discussion

Overall, the effects of resettlement on the roles of Somali refugee women were essentially negative. In terms of primary domestic roles, the women generally lost their power to nurture and hold together their families. Like the Chilean refugees in Kay's study, "the extended private domain which the women had known ... was very different from its impoverished and restricted counterpart in exile" (108). In terms of public roles, the women were limited in their ability to attend school or work, just as they were in Somalia. And the relative few who had careers in Somalia were not permitted to pursue them. For these formerly "public-private" women, resettlement was an especially retrogressive step.

Despite these obstacles, some of the women showed great resourcefulness and determination in the ways that they found to care for themselves and their families. Sales and Gregory reported much the same findings for the Somali refugee women in their study, and Hyndman made a similar observation in her study of Somali women in Kenyan refugee camps. In addition, a number of the women aspired to education and employment, both potentially important sources of power and prestige. To improve their skills, for instance, some were attending LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) English classes, a program sponsored by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Several others served as volunteers in an effort to gain Canadian work experience.

What remains is the question as to the impact of the five-year waiting period on the roles of the women in our study. Although the challenges they described were not unique

amongst refugee women (DeVoe; Kay; Koenig; Lipson and Miller; Sales and Gregory), it is our position that the constraints imposed on them because of their lack of identity documents exacerbated their problems in resettlement. We wonder whether they will ever be able to reclaim their stature in the private sphere and assert a more powerful role in the public sphere, even when the wait for sharciga is over.

While this article has described the experiences and realities of Somali refugee women, what has not been captured are the tears the women shed as they shared their stories. Waiting for *sharciga* is not only about documents and access to resources; it is also about the pain and deprivation that refugees experience as they wait to begin to build new lives. Our interactions with undocumented Somali refugee women have convinced us that what allows them to endure this wait is their deep sense of community, their great capacity to provide each other with mutual support, and their strong religious faith.

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Faduma Ahmed Alim is an educator and social activist who has for years advocated for Somali women's social, political, and economic rights. She co-founded the Somali Women's Movement in 1967, the first feminist organization. In Toronto, she is a board member of the Somali Immigrant Women's Association and she contributes numerous articles related to refugee issues in the widely circulated Somali newspaper, The Somali Press.

Hawa Abdullahi Mohamed is a landed immigrant living in Toronto where she does volunteer work with the Somali community. In Somalia she was Director of the Institute of Animal Science. She also organized community health services for Somali women and children in refugee camps in Kenya.

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[1]All names have been changed for this paper.

[2]A Convention refugee is a refugee claimant who has been approved for refugee status by Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board. For purposes of this article, the term "undocumented refugee" refers to Convention refugees without identity documents.

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LÉLIA YOUNG

L'Image Mobile

Un vieil arbre
n'a de sourire à offrir
au passant qui cueille ses mûres
Elles jonchent d'une inertie inscrite
l'herbe estivale
Sous le relief de l'oeil
l'écriture imprévisible du temps
laisse déceler les diverses langues
d'un visage
qui a taillé le caractère de sa vitalité
sur cette vigueur bruissante
burinée dans sa nudité
Cours ambré
à n'être que de toi
dans cette eau qui coule
il semble que l'univers
a coincé sa marche en nous
L'on dirait que ce corps solitaire
qui n'est ni de pierre ni de terre
porte un alphabet qui marque l'encre
de sa trace
La forme du songe terrestre
est ondulatoire
Mais où va-t-elle dans son survol
qui commence à émerger
du train galvaudé
Un courant galvanise l'arbre
Les mûres s'accrochent aux rameaux
Le spectateur se durcit
Les fragments du temps s'épaississent
leurs cadres sont de couleurs éculées
La sueur les fait s'écouler
en mélanges variants
Le bras rejoint les branches
mais ses fruits sont d'ordre différent
Ils viennent d'un espace sans oubli
Ils vont vers le dépliement de sa mémoire
"Nous touchons l'informulable"
s'est écrié le peintre en plantant son drapeau
dans les flots du vent
Depuis lors un lait a fondu l'or et l'argent
et les questions se sont dissipées
dans l'arc en ciel du miroir
étonnamment simple de la source
La réponse était toujours là
mais trop peu l'avait perçue
pour que l'arbre parle à la vague

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