

# Resistance Strategies

## *Somali Women's Struggles to*

BY HAMDI S. MOHAMED

*Cet article met en évidence les stratégies de résistance que les Somaliennes ont employées individuellement et collectivement pour donner un sens à leur vie défaits et pour reconstruire leur identité dans une nouvelle structure environnementale, dans une autre culture, dans une autre langue.*

The experience of becoming a refugee is a search for continuity despite sharp, if not violent, discontinuities. (Moussa)

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics indicate that 80 per cent of the 20 million refugees in the world today are women and children. An additional 24 million people are currently displaced within the borders of their countries, but do not qualify as Convention refugees because they do not cross an international border.

Factors that precipitate migration, particularly from the violence of war, are often extremely stressful and traumatizing. The suddenness and the condition of flight present a host of social, cultural, and psychological challenges to the refugees. They often experience a wide range of adjustment difficulties such as the trauma of separation, disruption of family, and migration. Upon arriving in the host countries, they have to make a series of socio-economic and socio-cultural adjustments as they struggle to reconstruct their lives.

Refugee experiences vary one from the other depending on the individual's past educational background, gender, age, race, and class. In addition, the experiences of refugees in the host country greatly differ from those of immigrants. An immigrant

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makes a conscious decision to resettle elsewhere. As suggested by Kunz, "It is the reluctance to uproot oneself, and the absence of positive original motivations to settle elsewhere, which characterizes all refugee decisions and distinguishes the refugee from the voluntary migrants" (130). The refugee often leaves his/her home country suddenly and under extreme circumstances and, as such, is less likely to physically or emotionally plan the move. As a result, refugees are more likely to arrive without their immediate families than are immigrants. They "often have fewer kin and community contacts in the receiving nation to buffer their arrival; and their move is associated with social crisis and personal trauma" (Opoku-Dapaah 1994; 12). The circumstances under which a refugee comes to a host country, therefore, considerably circumscribe his/her chances for resettlement. An examination of the data on refugees reveals that while the differences be-

tween refugee and immigrant are acknowledged by many scholars, few pay sufficient attention to the unique features of refugee resettlement experiences in the host country (see Opoku-Dapash 1994).

While all refugees experience the enormous challenges of adjusting to a new economic, social, and cultural environment and of overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, women are generally more vulnerable than men (see Boyd; Moussa). Furthermore, because of their position within the family, women bear most of the burden of the process of resettlement in the asylum countries (Sales). The vulnerability of refugee women is a product of a number of factors. Some of these include language and cultural barriers, racism, and structural and institutional discrimination. "While there is a truth to this depiction, focusing on their vulnerability places the problem on women rather than on the aggression and discrimination perpetrated against them because they are women" (Moussa 1-2). This article shall highlight some of the resistance strategies that Somali women, both individually and collectively, employ to contest the conditions that place them in a vulnerable situation.

Given the paucity of literature and the relatively short period of their lives in Canada, very little is known about the overall adjustment of the Somalis to their new environment. I conducted interviews with five Somali women who, in their professions as community workers and as counselors, come into close and daily contact with Somali women. These

# Reconstruct their Lives in Canada

interviews provide some insights into the personal and/or the collective experiences of Somali women in Canada. In addition, I draw upon my personal experiences and on my observations as a community activist and a researcher.

## Somali refugee women in Canada

I came to Canada to find peace.  
I have climbed the ladder of peace and I thought that would be all. I ran from flames but now I'm faced with hidden flames.  
(CCR 1)

Following the massive political and social upheavals accompanying the civil war of the late 1980s in Somalia, thousands of Somalis were forced to flee their homes. Many of these Somalis came to Canada as refugee claimants. By 1993, Somalis were the largest group of new immigrants in the Ottawa-Carleton region.<sup>1</sup>

A significant number of the Somalis who have come to Canada are women and children.<sup>2</sup> Many of them face challenges such as culture shock, family disintegration, social isolation, economic difficulties, and generally occupy marginal positions in the host country. In addition to the range of diverse and traumatic experiences related to war such as the separation of familial surroundings and witness of violence, many Somali women have experienced rape and sexual assault both in Somalia and in refugee camps prior to their arrival in Canada (Mohamed 1997).

These women rarely seek counselling. There are two reasons for this. First, there is a cultural stigma at-

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tached to being raped. As Dirie points out, women do not often speak of their traumatic experiences of sexual assault "because it is too painful, too shameful for their particular cultural beliefs, ... and because many have opted for denial to keep their sanity" (5). The second reason is related to the fact that the concepts of mental health and psychotherapy are foreign to the Somali community.<sup>3</sup> Refugees and immigrants rarely seek outside advice or talk about their problems with mental health professionals (Sue and Sue).

Although women traditionally assume most of the responsibilities in the home, the lack of support and family/social networks they are used to relying on in their home countries makes the work of caring for the household very difficult. Furthermore, their responsibilities, both at home and outside, also increase as the family unit and dynamics change because of the experience of civil war and migration. The stress of adjust-

ment to a new culture makes the task of parenting, in particular, without the support of an extended family and community, a daunting task for many women (Abdukadir *et al.*). As one mother commented, "when I came to Ottawa, I woke up one morning and realized I had to take care of nine children by myself." (10) Raising a family in a social context where they are isolated and occupy a marginal position, is a very frustrating experience for many of the women.

Children had a whole world in which to run around. The women were not locked in their homes, we had neighbours and many relatives who helped with the children. [Here] everything has to be done by you—the children, the house, the shopping, the bills. (Yusuf 3-4)

Traditionally men do not get involved in domestic affairs. As one woman notes, "Here in Canada, men are not used to working in the home with the housework and children. It is not their fault. That is our culture" (Yusuf 4). It is not surprising then that even in this new setting, Somali men remain hesitant about sharing household chores, such as cooking, doing the laundry, and caring for children. As one woman comments:

Somali men, they never cook. Only women cook. Only women look after kids. Only women do everything. We say the husband is only name. We know [sic] Somali women! We say the man is only the name.

Everything else is the woman.  
(qtd. in Rumble 84)

Moreover, the civil war engendered a transformation of gender roles. "Women's roles have been revolutionized by the absence of men or by their failure to attend to the daily survival of their families" (Osman 12). The situation is compounded in the asylum countries where the traditional men's role as providers for the family is undermined by high unemployment rates (Mohamed 1998). "Many of the men have become depressed, since the very basis of their identity as providers has been usurped by the Canadian welfare system" (Yusuf 3). This often leads to a large number of men becoming demoralized by this threat to their "manhood" as providers of the family. While many problems stem from unemployment and a reluctant dependence on welfare, there are often many conflicts that arise in a family as a result in the shift of traditional gender roles between men and women. This often causes men to accuse women of "absorbing foreign cultures" and to feel threatened by women's "new found freedom." In this context of constant strife, women's role becomes more complex and her responsibilities overwhelming.

#### **The politics of setting agendas**

I suffer this humiliation, this inhuman subjugation of circumcision; you can never know how painful it is unless you've undergone the operation yourself. (Farah 186)

One aspect of Somali women's lives in Canada that has received a great deal of attention is the issue of *female genital mutilation* (FGM). This attention, while welcome on many levels, seems to overtake any other discussions on Somali women's lives in the diaspora and what they deem to consider priorities in their daily struggles to resettle in asylum countries. Indeed, many Somalis are baffled

by the dramatic coverage of the issue and the constant attention it receives from both the Canadian government and public, while nobody seems to care about their overall discouraging condition in Canada. The key questions are who sets the agenda and who has the authority to make a decision about women's lives?

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### **Traditional gender ideologies that prevent women from taking control of their bodies have been challenged in Somali poetry, novels, and short stories.**

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According to Maxine Molyneux, the notion of gender interest can be divided into practical and strategic gender interests. Practical gender interest falls into the category of situations associated with the immediate social and economic demands of women, including issues of poverty and access to services. Molyneux argues that movements operating around practical gender interests are not necessarily aimed at reducing gender inequality. In contrast, strategic interests are derived from an analysis of women's subordination and require a feminist level of consciousness to struggle for them. Many Somalis feel that their practical needs such as family reunification, language training, and settlement needs are far from being met and should have precedence over their strategic interest.

FGM fits in the strategic interest category. It takes gender consciousness for women to be able to realize that they have the right to control their own bodies. Many Somali

women are, in fact, aware of this right. In Somalia, under the auspices of the Somali Democratic Women's Organization, many women have been mobilized and national campaigns have been carried out since the 1970s. Traditional gender ideologies that prevent women from taking control of their bodies have been challenged in Somali poetry, novels, and short stories. Shukria Samatar points out, "the seeds for change have been already sown in Somalia." It is easy to overlook the fact that many Somali women in Canada have experienced intense psychological trauma and physical violence because of the civil war, and as a result of the the everyday hurdles and challenges they must face to survive in an asylum country. These women's preoccupation are not strictly confined to the issue of FGM. They are concerned about families still living in their war-ravaged country or displaced in refugee camps, about the lengthy refugee claims process, the lack of appropriate employment, and racial oppression. As Rakiya Omaar, a co-ordinator of Africa Right, a human rights organization, points out, "Somalis cannot comprehend the focus on this issue when their entire country has fallen apart" (qtd in Flint 3).

In Canada there are women who actively seek to educate both the Somali and mainstream communities on health issues relating to the practice of FGM. The Horn of Africa Resource and Research Group has sponsored a number of activities, such as community education projects, on the issue. This is an organization made up of a partnership between Somali women and men and community agencies whose aim is to improve access to resources. In addition, *sensitization workshops* on how to incorporate an understanding of FGM for health care professionals were undertaken in the Ottawa-Carleton region. These and many other countless activities initiated by Somali women indicate that they do not passively accept what

was prescribed to them and are continuously voicing their rejection of "traditions" that victimize them.

### **Women's struggles to rebuild their lives in diaspora**

*Dayaxa haddii la waayo xiddigabaa lagu guuraa* (If the moon is not shining, one uses the stars to help one move).<sup>4</sup>

Somali women in the diaspora, particularly but not exclusively in Canada, negotiate dynamic identities of resistance and defy prescriptions and stereotypes in their daily lives. While Somali women in Canada were victimized on many levels—first by their patriarchal culture and traditions and then the systemic racism of the institutional structures in Canada—they are not victims. They invariably continue to struggle against conditions that circumscribe their lives and have undertaken a multiplicity of actions aimed at improving their status in Canada. Somali women engage in struggles to make meaning of their fragmented lives as they reconstruct their identities. Their actions can be characterized as resistance because they are clearly and consciously intended to improve their current conditions in the asylum countries (Dei).

An employment counsellor concurred with me about the strength of Somali women when relating the following experience he had with one woman. As a settlement worker he had translated for this particular Somali woman in Kiswahili on many occasions. One day she needed to speak to her welfare worker. She could not find the settlement worker for translation, so she went directly to her welfare worker's office. She insisted (in Somali) at the front desk that she must speak to her worker. Not understanding what she was saying but aware that she would not leave without seeing him, they led her to the welfare worker in question. When she finally saw him, she

started talking to him (in Somali again) and told him directly what she needed. The worker became frantic. He needed the settlement worker to translate and kept calling him but he was tied up in a meeting elsewhere. He left many messages for him. When the settlement worker returned to his office, he found

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the numerous messages waiting for him and immediately called the welfare worker who was "in the middle of crisis by then." The woman finally got what she wanted. The settlement worker later reflected that "she did not have language difficulties; her worker did" (Mengistab).

There are many cases where Somali women, despite the linguistic and cultural barriers, have taken initiative to improve their situation in the asylum country. For example, with the technical assistance of Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture in Toronto (CCVT), a group of Somali women founded a support group. In this group, women discuss their needs and exchange practical information on resources available to physically and socially isolated Somali women, how "the system works," and how to build a bridge between their culture and the Canadian culture. In addition, they have established a surrogate extended

family to provide the assistance and social networks they are lacking in Canada. These women share babysitting responsibilities, visiting each other in the hospital, and so on. The Somali women's group model was later adopted by the CCVT to establish mutual support groups for men and women of other refugee communities, including West Africans, Tamils, Central Americans, Iranians, and Bosnians (Dirie 6).

The women in the support group came together to make a change, to improve their situations in the diaspora, and to play a social advocacy role. They "did not merely want to learn about the attitudes and institutions that affected them, but wanted to change these attitudes and institutions" (Blakeney 287). As part of addressing their particular needs in the host country, they challenged structural barriers to settlement in Canada. For instance, these women, mostly refugee claimants, could not afford housing at market price. Thus, in 1991, they mounted a legal challenge against the Metro Toronto Housing Authorities' policy of excluding refugee claimants from access to public housing. They started organizing, writing petitions, and sending letters to their local politicians in order to put the pressure on the Housing Authorities. They eventually succeeded in changing the laws to make refugee claimants eligible for subsidized housing.

Toronto is not the only place where women are organizing to meet their needs in the asylum countries. Somali women in Ottawa are also establishing networks and informal neighbourhood support groups to organize activities for the emerging community.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, Somali women are not eager to adapt to Canadian society uncritically. As Moussa points out in her analysis of Ethiopian and Eritrean women in Toronto, the women's journey from the Horn of Africa to Canada was characterized by a resistance to patriarchal, cultural, racist, classist

and military domination. They seek to forge new identities, based on their Somali roots, but adapted to the Canadian environment. Many have succeeded in striking a balance between the old and new culture and have developed a new Somali-Canadian identity. Despite the tremendous hardships and obstacles in the path of their resettlement process, these women have been able to successfully reconstruct a life for themselves and their families in Canada. As one woman notes:

I am staying here whatever happens. I know I would meet people who would not be soft with me, but there is no going back home—there is nothing. Let them [those standing in her way of making a life for herself] do whatever. They can scream, they can yell. I don't care! (qtd in Rumble 100)

#### By way of conclusion

In Canada, refugee women are socially constructed as problematic, dependent on the system, and unable to adjust to life in Canada. However, Somali women's struggles to integrate into mainstream Canadian society help us to understand that their lives do not fit into these essentialized categories.

This article has highlighted the particular issues that Somali women face as refugees in Canada and the struggles they have faced in order to survive and make sense of their fragmented lives and identities in a new cultural, linguistic, and structural environment. While Somali women were often victimized they are not victims. Indeed, as Moussa postulates, the very decision women make "to flee their homes and country and in their lives thereafter ... [can be seen as] challenging state, violence, and patriarchal traditions" (Moussa 2).

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<sup>1</sup>Ottawa-Carleton hasn't seen such a sudden influx of newcomers since the region opened its heart to nearly 4,000 'boat people' from Southeast Asia more than a decade ago" (*Ottawa Citizen*). There are approximately 100,000 Somalis in Canada.

<sup>2</sup>According to 1994 IRB, children younger than 18 constitute 40 per cent of Somali refugees in Canada.

<sup>3</sup>Cultural understanding is vital in any form of counselling when the client and the counsellor are not from the same culture. The traditional methods of obtaining assistance in the Somali culture based on Somali values need to be incorporated into any counselling programs. (See Mah.)

<sup>4</sup>A Somali proverb set in the nomadic context. It means if you don't have what you want, you make do with what you have.

<sup>5</sup>Founded in 1995, the Somali Women's Information Line is a 24-hour phone line where women can call and leave a message specifying their needs with respect to immigration issues, issues concerning their children's education, housing, and employment. A volunteer picks up the message, returns the calls and either escorts the women or advocates on her behalf with Canadian authorities over the phone. The recently founded Horn of Africa Women's Association's (based in Ottawa) mission statement is "to enable women and children from the Horn to improve the quality of their life through active and gainful participation in Canadian life and thereby, facilitate their integration to mainstream of the Canadian society." Their objectives include to empower women through education and to provide support

and services to women and children such as advocacy.

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**ASHLEIGH WALSH**

**A Hand From a Mother**

Sweet perfection to the eye  
but each man can see the pain inside.  
My mother's love will always be  
casting  
down on pure white snow,  
while people leave their minds to  
roam.

Look away and you may miss  
a kiss from God onto your lips.  
A hand that soothed and held me  
tight  
every hour of every night.  
Many say a child must grow  
to appreciate what a mother knows.  
I thank the Lord each and every day  
I have a mother who was strong  
enough to stay.  
To teach me things that she has  
learned  
and help me through life's twists and  
turns.

*Ashleigh Walsh is the daughter of Irish immigrant parents, Carole and John, and sister to Jason. She wrote this poem for her mother's 50th birthday.*