

The Resettlement Experiences of Oromo Women Who Entered Canada as Refugees

Biftu Yousuf et Nicole S. Berry

Volume 37, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091284ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40652>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (imprimé)
1920-7336 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Yousuf, B. & Berry, N. (2021). The Resettlement Experiences of Oromo Women Who Entered Canada as Refugees. *Refuge*, 37(2), 78–92.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40652>

Résumé de l'article

Une littérature de plus en plus importante démontre que les expériences genrées produisent des conditions différentes pour les hommes et les femmes qui deviennent réfugiés et également par la suite. Cet article a cherché à contribuer à cette littérature en enquêtant sur les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes Oromo qui ont immigré au Canada en tant que réfugiées. À cette fin, nous avons mené des entrevues auprès de six femmes Oromo dans l'Ouest du Canada au sujet de ce qui les a amenées à quitter l'Éthiopie, leurs expériences comme réfugiées demandant l'asile, et leurs difficultés en matière de réinstallation et d'intégration. Les résultats démontrent que les femmes Oromo partagent les difficultés rencontrées par leurs homologues masculins, mais sont aussi victimes de subjugation fondée sur le genre à chaque étape de l'émigration.





The Resettlement Experiences of Oromo Women Who Entered Canada as Refugees

Biftu Yousuf^a and Nicole S. Berry^b

ABSTRACT

A growing body of literature shows that gender-based experiences produce different circumstances for men and women who become refugees and thereafter. This article sought to contribute to this literature by investigating the challenges faced by Oromo women who have immigrated to Canada as refugees. Toward this end, we interviewed six Oromo women in Western Canada regarding what led them to leave Ethiopia, their experiences as refugees seeking asylum, and their struggles with resettlement and integration. The findings reveal that Oromo women share the challenges endured by their male counterparts, but also are victims of gender-based subjugation at each stage of emigration.

KEYWORDS

Oromo women; asylum seekers; migration and resettlement; intersectionality; gender dynamics

RESUMÉ

Une littérature de plus en plus importante démontre que les expériences genrées produisent des conditions différentes pour les hommes et les femmes qui deviennent réfugiés et également par la suite. Cet article a cherché à contribuer à cette littérature en enquêtant sur les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes Oromo qui ont immigré au Canada en tant que réfugiées. À cette fin, nous avons mené des entrevues auprès de six femmes Oromo dans l'Ouest du Canada au sujet de ce qui les a amenées à quitter l'Éthiopie, leurs expériences comme réfugiées demandant l'asile, et leurs difficultés en matière de réinstallation et d'intégration. Les résultats démontrent que les femmes Oromo partagent les difficultés rencontrées par leurs homologues masculins, mais sont aussi victimes de subjugation fondée sur le genre à chaque étape de l'émigration.

INVESTIGATING THE EMIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Resettlement is often thought of as an end of the emigration experience and a beginning of re/building a stable existence. Although

immigration offers refugees a chance to build new lives, the adversities that refugees experience can persist even years after resettlement. Previous studies have shown that resettlement in a new country results in considerable anxiety and a period of adjust-

CONTACT

^a (Corresponding author) ✉ bmyousuf@yorku.ca

York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

^b ✉ nicole_berry@sfu.ca

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

ment and integration (Kumsa, 2005, 2006; Pittaway et al., 2009). Refugees are frequently confronted with the loss of cultural values, religious practices, and support systems (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Stewart et al., 2010). Additionally, refugees may struggle with procuring adequate employment (Creese & Wiebe, 2012), securing safe and affordable housing (Sherrell et al., 2007), and accessing services (Makwarimba et al., 2013).

This research was prompted by an interest in understanding the emigration and resettlement experiences of Oromo women who came to Canada as refugees. From freedom fighters to mothers, Oromo women have always played active roles in the Oromo community in Ethiopia. For example, Ethiopian women fought alongside their male counterparts as front-line combatants in the quest to defeat Mengistu's Derg military dictatorship, which was known for its violent "Red Terror" campaign (1977–79) (Veale, 2003). The prolonged war was exacerbated by famine and drought and took the lives of many innocent civilians between 1983 and 1985 (Henze, 2000). The violence abated somewhat for the next six years, and in 1991 the Derg regime was finally demobilized (Veale, 2003).

In the post-Derg era, many Oromo people living in Ethiopia continued to report political, economic, and ethnic oppression (Hassen, 2002; Gudina, 2007). The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination had been critical of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, a political coalition reported to be dominated by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), for its systematic targeting of Oromo people (Tronvoll, 2008). According to well-documented reports, for example the UN committee which monitors the implementation of the International Convention on

the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the Oromo people have been victim of "summary executions, rape of women and girls, arbitrary detention, torture, humiliations and destruction of property and crops." In addition, notes Jalata (2005) "the Ethiopian government has a history of using state terrorism to commit genocide on the Oromo and other Indigenous peoples" (p. 87). These conditions are recognized as constituting persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Caux, 2011; UNHCR, 2011) and support the Oromos' right to seek asylum in other countries.

When recounting their experiences as refugees, women almost uniformly report harrowing realities. A growing body of literature shows that refugee women suffer disproportionately (1) in situations that cause flight from their homelands as well as when they are in transit (Dauvergne, 2006); (2) in refugee camps (Beswick, 2001); and (3) as "urban refugees" awaiting processing (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 273). As LaViolette (2007) explains, refugee women have been persecuted for transgressing gender norms and frequently become victims of gender-based violence. Studies show how trauma caused by gender-based violence can make it difficult for refugee women to adjust to a new home country, even though they do not always bear physical scars of their abuse (Bartolomei et al., 2014; Berman et al., 2006).

Other research (Hyman et al., 2004, 2008; McSpadden & Moussa, 1993) conducted in North America suggests that it is particularly difficult for men when they immigrate, when compared to their female counterparts. For example, one study utilized qualitative interviews and focus groups with 25 married, separated, and divorced Ethiopian newcomers, to explore the effects of post-migration changes on marital relationships (Hyman et al., 2008). The authors note that "for many

of the male participants, migration was associated with downward status mobility and a loss of status and authority in the family" (p. 154), while women were described as having achieved some upward mobility, particularly in independence and autonomy. For some, the changes in status were said to create marital conflict, increase the occurrence of intimate partner violence, and generate changes in communication that often led to a relationship breakup (Hyman et al., 2008).

McSpadden & Moussa (1993) qualitative study of gender, identity, and resettlement of Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants in North America corroborates the potentially negative effects of status difference on family dynamics. Similar to Hyman et al. (2008), they found evidence of status decline and limited opportunities for men, which precipitated shame, depression, and even suicide. McSpadden & Moussa (1993) note that for men, "this decline was most severely experienced around jobs and the education necessary to obtain desired, hopeful employment and status" (p. 222). Conversely, women did not report the same status decline, as they were inclined to view their new environment as providing more opportunities, particularly for advancing their education (McSpadden & Moussa, 1993).

Findings from these studies typify a facile narrative that immigrant women become positively transformed post-resettlement (Hyman et al., 2008; McSpadden & Moussa, 1993). The post-migration experience is portrayed as being emancipating, and difficult or even undesirable for men as compared to women. The narrative alludes to the notion that a change in geographical context (e.g., flight from home country to a democracy) ultimately precipitates gender liberation for immigrant women, particularly women who immigrate from predominantly Muslim countries.

We use a qualitative exploration of Oromo immigrant women's lives to highlight the limits of this narrative. We argue that the attention to status difference and liberation for immigrant women obscures a more complete understanding of Oromo women's gendered lives. By maintaining a focus on the post-immigrant experience, the gender-liberation narrative downplays how gender dynamics shape the lives of former refugee women in enduring ways. Significantly, by doing so, it camouflages the ongoing roles that gender plays in women's everyday struggles. Studies that examined the experiences of Oromo refugee women resettled in the United States found that pre-migration traumas inflicted on refugee women exacerbate their post-migration stress (Jaranson et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). Our aim is to elaborate upon and contribute to this work by exploring all phases of the emigration journey, which could provide a more holistic context for understanding the resettlement experiences of refugee women.

To illustrate these points, our article draws on qualitative interviews with privately- and government-sponsored Oromo refugee women who arrived in different chronological waves of settlement. We explore women's gendered lives in three phases: before they left their homes; while they were waiting to come to Canada; and post-resettlement. The juxtaposition of these different phases not only upholds the usual insight that gendered conditions in Canada are vastly better when compared with previous gender-based hardships, but, more importantly, allows us to see how women's earlier experiences of gender oppression are not just left behind after arriving in Canada.

RESEARCH METHODS

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research was motivated by the idea that refugees' own voices are an important part of scholarship, and we were concerned by the silences surrounding Oromo women's voices. Our theoretical approach was guided by intersectionality. As advanced by [Crenshaw \(1989, 1991\)](#), intersectionality is a multi-axis framework that can account for numerous aspects of identity markers and discrimination. Intersectionality rebuffs homogenous narratives by challenging single-axis frameworks that artificially prioritize one identity marker. Single stories of oppression erase and obscure the multiplicity of discrimination faced by those who embody marginalized social positions, such as refugee women. Considering women simply as women may not fully capture the circumstances they face; intersectional approaches encourage us to consider the multiplicative effect of each new source of potential discrimination (e.g., skin colour, religion, and/or poverty) ([Aberman, 2014](#); [Crenshaw, 1991](#); [Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001](#)). An intersectional lens foregrounds a multi-dimensional analysis highlighting women's narratives that have largely been excluded. To honour an intersectional approach, we decided to use a qualitative, inductive methodology that allowed participants to talk about their own experiences in their own words. Our principal method was open-ended interviews (discussed below).

Sample

We sought participation from Oromo women who had immigrated to Canada as refugees. A member of an Oromo women's group, who was part of the first author's social network, helped identify and mobilize participants for the study. Six women

between the ages of 18 and 50 who lived in Western Canada were interviewed.¹ The participants in the study came to Canada from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia between 1989 and 2013. All of the women were involved with their local Oromo-Canadian diasporic community. They shared similar socio-political, economic, and historical backgrounds, but were diverse in other respects. For example, some had fled an active war, while others sought refuge from the ongoing and residual effects of the century-long war launched against the Oromo people by Ethiopian officials. Most of the participants did not know their real ages, so the ages listed in Table 1 are their estimates.

Table 1
Sample Characteristics

Participant pseudonym	Age	Years in Canada
Faynet	50	23
Deka	49	12
Kuleeni	42	8
Muna	21	4
Hamilee	18	4
Rinas	22	1

The Role of Ethics

Given the fragile political contexts that refugees come from, the ongoing violence linked to their places of origin, and the impact this has on their lives in countries of resettlement, the participants' social location was of particular importance to our ethical considerations. [Guillemin and Gillam \(2004\)](#) identify two dimensions of ethics in research studies: (1) "procedural ethics"—which include the processes involved in

¹The participants were this age at the time of the interviews.

gaining the approval of bodies that govern ethics; and (2) “ethics in practice”—which entail the day-to-day ethical considerations that researchers address throughout their research (pp. 263–265). Formal ethics approval was granted by the Research Ethics Board (REB) responsible for overseeing the research project. Although formal ethics approval is oriented to the question of potential harm, as well as consent and transparency, our guidelines also considered the question of ethics more broadly, as it relates to culturally and politically appropriate protocols.

As an Oromo person and member of the Oromo diaspora in Canada, the first author was familiar with the norms customarily followed to seek entry and conclude engagements with Oromo communities. Having this practical knowledge led her to believe that typical REB protocols, such as providing debriefing sessions to ensure well-being or offering information on psychological services, would not be most suitable for the target population. The distress protocols used included monitoring participants’ emotional reactions, providing breaks when participants appeared upset, and holding space when participants wanted to articulate their emotions. Given the first author’s own social location as a researcher and member of the Oromo diaspora, she felt doubly responsible for upholding higher ethical standards than bioethics; she was responsible for protecting and representing a population with whom she identified. These approaches served to mitigate concerns about non-maleficence.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Because we wanted to document Oromo women’s views of their own experiences, we chose interviews as the best method to capture the viewpoints, experiences, beliefs,

and motivations of women who came to Canada as refugees. Every effort was made to encourage participants to share stories and to honour their voices. Interviews were conducted as participant-led dialogues. While we were interested in their perspectives on the conditions that led them to leave Ethiopia and seek refuge, how they negotiated and navigated asylum-seeking processes, and what their lives have been like since they resettled in Canada, questions were open-ended and used only to prompt discussions about the three phases of emigration. Thereby participants were given the opportunity for direct dialogue about what mattered to them.

All interviews were conducted in person by the first author in 2014 at a time and location chosen by each participant. Interviews lasted between one and two hours, and all were recorded with the participants’ verbal consent. Three interviews were conducted in Oromo, two involved a mixture of Oromo and English, and one was conducted fully in English.

Each interview was transcribed with any Oromo translated to English by the first author. An inductive approach inspired by grounded theory was taken to coding, which allowed concepts, ideas, and meanings to evolve from the data (Palys & Atchison, 2013). The qualitative research software NVivo was utilized to aid in the compilation and management of the data. Fifty-eight codes and sub-codes and core themes were identified, which became the basis for integrating the data, performing in-depth data analysis, and developing a storyline.

In the sections that follow, we document the three focal phases in women’s lives that we explored: life in their homeland before they left, fleeing the homeland, and post-settlement in Canada. Our intersectional approach led us to identify a unique set

of challenges linked to women's individual (i.e., age, family structure, and marital status) and shared (i.e., gender, social class, and socio-political context of forced migration) social locations, which profoundly influenced their emigration experiences. Using women's own words, we highlight the intersectional themes that help substantiate the multiplicative effect of social locations, and how they have shaped women's experiences throughout the three phases of their journey.

HOW DO OROMO WOMEN BECOME REFUGEES?

Oromo men have been subjected to unimaginable torture while detained, including having heavy water-filled jugs secured to their testes, being thrown into pits before being lit on fire, and being buried alive ((Fossati et al., 1996). Oromo women, too, have been tortured and terrorized. They have had bottles and poles shoved into their vaginas (Fossati et al., 1996), and pregnant women have been beaten and killed (Jalata, 2005). Even Oromo children have not been spared from persecution (Jalata, 2005).

Our participants recalled experiences consistent with Jalata's (2005) revelations. Deka, for example, described the first time that the TPLF came to her family home in search of her husband:

I was 9 months pregnant and the TPLF soldier [a member of Ethiopian security forces] was around my house. One guy came and knocked [on] my door at about 3 am.... I don't know, but it was more than midnight. He asked where my husband was, and I told him [he was] sleeping. I asked him if he wanted me to wake him up and he said no and proceeded to look around the house. He then took my husband and came back and asked me where the gun was, and that my husband had told him that there was a gun inside the house. He said, "Your husband said to give it to us" [and I responded] "But we don't have

anything." He tried to trick us. And he took my husband to jail. I was very shocked and upset that time and 2 or 3 days later I delivered a dead baby.

Deka felt that the death of her baby was a direct result of the fear and shock that she experienced when the TPLF harassed and detained her husband. As Kuleeni recalled, "There are so many Oromo children that are perishing due to this war [against Oromos].... What about the time when they would capture Oromo women and cut off their breast so that their children would have no milk to drink from?" Ethiopian officials' history of colonization and systematic oppression of Oromo people had no limits and was without mercy (Bulcha, 2011; Hassen, 2015; Jalata, 1996; Jalata & Schaffer, 2013).

Both Faynet and Kuleeni shared their experiences of the war launched against the Oromo people when Ethiopia was under Mengistu's Derg regime. In the following excerpt, Faynet described her experiences as a young girl in Ethiopia who was a victim of the Red Terror campaign of the seventies. She became separated from her family and was unable to return to her village because of the civil war. Those who could escape scattered and simply kept on going:

When they open that [bazooka] fire, people leave everything they have on the ground [and] on the floor and what they are doing, and everybody is running for their lives. That's the time I ran with the people who was running. [At] that time I left, we ran to another farm. And from the farm to another village. From another village.... We didn't stop. We kept going. When the fight starts, day and night, they don't stop. They open fire and fight and fight and fight and fight and fight. When they fight you just try to find a place to run. A safe place to go.

Ad hoc familial groups of people were drawn together by common fate and walked together on what Faynet recalled as a 3-week to 1-month journey to Somalia. There was death and destruction all around them and throughout the trip.

Most of the people I didn't know. I took up with them and ... whatever we got, food or water, whatever we got, the day we had food we eat, the day we didn't have food we didn't eat. We passed so many dead people. On top of us there were airplanes throwing bombs on us. Running away from that. During the daytime we hide in the bushes so the airplanes, they don't see you. During the day you hide under the bushes and under the trees. The big[gest] trees you find, during the day you hide under there and you don't come out. Because the airplanes, they don't think that a group of people are going. The military are sitting there, and they just throw the bombs and kill people. So many people die like that. During the nighttime we keep walking.

Kuleeni took a different path. After seeing her family killed off by Ethiopian officials, she felt obligated to uphold her family name by joining the ongoing Oromo struggle for freedom and peace. Her story exemplifies the roles that she and other Oromo women played in the armed resistance:

I was growing up and being raised as this [conflict] was going on, and I was responsible, with others, to make and carry food on our backs to the resistance group. They [members of the resistance] were afraid of the Derg because they [the Derg] would suspect male adults, but they wouldn't suspect small children and women [and that's why it became our job to transport food]...When the Amharic-speaking [Ethiopian officials] would come and check your house, they would steal breast milk and drink it. They would hit the kids, throw them out, and step on them. We were left with no choice but to pick up guns and defend ourselves.

However, repercussions for her involvement were severe. She and a male and female friend were apprehended. The man was shot on the spot, while the women were incarcerated. As Kuleeni recalled,

After being locked up for eight years ... I finally had my day in court. They asked me if I had ever killed anyone, and I said that I never did. As I stood in court I remember being at the end of my life, as my health had derailed so significantly. I had gastric

issues before I was ever incarcerated and then suffered from all kinds of aches and pains from the beatings and trauma that I received while in prison, which received minimal to no medical treatment.

Although Oromo people experience structural oppression, Oromo women suffered disproportionately during armed conflicts. In part, this is a consequence of the gender-based inequalities that are firmly rooted in patriarchal cultures and societies, then exacerbated in politically unstable environments. For example, participants in the study noted that girls were more disadvantaged than boys because of gender-role expectations. Deka recalled being told that "no girls are allowed to attend school outside.... That is shameful for parents and for the girls." Several participants addressed how the social construction of gender manifested in the oppression of Oromo people:

I never had education because back home mostly I grew in a family without a father. My mother raised us. So that time we had difficulty to go to, especially the girls, me and my sisters had difficulty to go to school because we had to help my mother with taking care of the rest of my brothers and sisters.... Back home ... the women [are] just for the kids and the housewife.

(Faynet)

Although the boys who did make it to school faced political realities they resented—not being allowed to speak Oromo, for example, and being forced to adopt Amharic, the language of an ethnolinguistic majority group that dominated the Ethiopian government—many were able to gain political agency through their higher level of education. Although all people are affected by conflict and displacement, girls' and women's lack of education, with its concurrent lack of political agency, sets them up for a life in which they have limited hope for upward mobility. The combination of structural oppression

and social constraints embedded in gender socialization is instrumental in determining how women become refugees.

BEING A REFUGEE

Most participants in this study followed unplanned migration routes, which landed them in different countries and in temporary settlements. Rinas was the only participant whose country of first asylum was Canada. Deka, Hamilee, and Kuleeni went to Kenya before settling in Canada, while Muna went east to Somalia. Faynet went to multiple countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, before resettling in Canada as her final destination. These locations did not always provide the women with a safe haven.

Living as a Foreigner

Refugees often find themselves jumping from the frying pan into the fire—escaping from one unstable and insecure environment, only to land in another. Sometimes their escape is followed by time spent in the limbo of refugee camps; Benjamin (1998) and Beswick (2001) found these journeys to be particularly horrendous for refugee women, with beatings, sexual assault, and other violence occurring frequently and always a threat. Many refugees prefer to live in urban areas to avoid camps. Although urban spaces may provide refugees with greater autonomy and economic opportunities, refugees who live in these settings also face a host of vulnerabilities including marginalization and exclusion, limited access to aid and other resources, and a lack of legal rights and protection (Grabska, 2006; Jacobson, 2006; Landau, 2006). All participants felt fortunate to have avoided the camps, but still experienced hardship while living in urban contexts.

For example, Deka recalled what life was like for her and her family when they took refuge in neighbouring Kenya:

We left [for] Nairobi to save our lives.... But even in Kenya, the situation was very bad. For female refugees particularly, the police would stop us and demand money from us. Because we don't have a [refugee] status and we stayed there as refugees [seeking asylum] illegally, we had no choice but to pay them off or they would rape, beat, and kill us.

During this limbo period in another country, women often opted to live in urban areas, connect with pre-existing social networks, and search for menial work to support themselves. As Kuleeni recollected,

I was able to find some work cleaning and make very little money; still, I had nowhere to sleep or stay permanently. I didn't have shoes. Pillow. Blanket. I remembered the time when someone gave me a blanket, I felt rich. Someone else bought me shoes. Someone else donated a mattress to me. Oh boy! I was very happy.

Although Kuleeni had a hard time while in exile, she was at least able to join a pre-existing Oromo community and attain some support from its members.

Hamilee, who moved to Kenya with extended family members as a young girl, reported that her experience of waiting in a host country was positive. She valued the freedom to practise her Oromo culture and recalled how much she appreciated this aspect of her life while living as a foreigner in Kenya. Her experience of living as a refugee may have been more positive than that of other participants because she was a child without the responsibilities of the adults who cared for her.

Rite of Passage and Web of Secrets: Ad Hoc Families

After fleeing their homes, all but one participant reported becoming entangled in a

web of secrets. Participants assumed new identities by joining what we refer to as “ad hoc families” to expedite and secure refugee resettlement in Canada. To create ad hoc families, women needed new documents and new stories or facts that were consistent with those new identities. Women described how they kept secrets as a mechanism of survival; though some documents or stories might be contrived, the realities behind the need to flee their homes were authentic.

An important gender dimension governed how women became enmeshed in the web of secrets. Heads of households—fathers, brothers, uncles, and husbands—told the women what to say and how to use their new identities. As the women lacked autonomy in their families and communities and were afraid that their claims would be rejected, they did what they were told. Several reports have concluded that restrictive policies force migrants to use illegal and dangerous means of entry, underscoring how women and children are at particular risk of exploitation (Morrison et al., 2001; Human-RightsWatch et al., 2001). For example, Faynet and her four children made it to their destination in Europe, which was their final stop before permanently resettling in Canada, by using fake passports. Before her stay in Europe, Faynet was in the Middle East with her husband and children. There the police were ready to deport them to Ethiopia for being undocumented, regardless of the fact this would put their lives in danger. Faynet’s husband felt there was no choice but to obtain fake passports if their family were to survive.

During that time, he tried to find a passport for myself and my children so we can leave from there as soon as possible, because we knew that we would not get a citizen[ship status] right away ... like a fake passport and ahhh we found a passport. It wasn’t

like fake fake, it was a Somalia lady who had a passport and she gave us the passport. We put my photo and my children’s photos [in it].

She did as her husband instructed and fled with her four children while her husband stayed behind to work. Upon landing in Europe, Faynet discarded the fake passports and applied for asylum. The upshot, however, was that she was a single mother to four children living in a foreign country, with absolutely no support system. Faynet’s husband joined the family a year later.

Hamilee and Rinas had different stories. They were accepted into Canada’s refugee resettlement program as daughters of an ad hoc family. When the interviewer asked Hamilee, “Do you have any family in Canada?” she first asked whether it was safe to reveal a secret. Then she told the interviewer, “They are not my real family. They are just my fake dad and my fake mom, and I just came as if they are my parents.” These revelations were not entirely surprising. The first author had been privy to such stories before but did not know what led to such situations or their implications for refugees. Hamilee described her role—rehearsing and memorizing her ad hoc family’s stories and learning to keep their secrets—and what was at stake:

I had to go for many interviews, and to come to Canada it took such a long time ... they want to know everything: what kinds of problems we experienced back home, why we felt that we needed to leave the country, and why we couldn’t go back, etc. They interviewed me every day ... of course it is scary. Sometimes you forget. Each visit that I had with them I would rehearse the story, because we knew that we were lying so it would have been easy to forget. If we were telling the truth, it would have been easy to recall the story, but 90% of it was a lie. I especially told many lies, that I was an only child, that I had no other family other than them, that they were my parents. However, it is true that there are so many problems in Ethiopia.

Hamilee's experience reveals just how difficult and onerous it was for the women to keep secrets. The lives of her fake mother and father also were dependent on her keeping her story straight, because any slip-up would affect their resettlement determination.

The situation for Rinas was similar. She explained that she was assigned the role of daughter in her ad hoc family after plans for another individual to do so did not work out: "My fake father had a space on his paper and that's how I got to go with him to Canada. The group I came with ... one was his fake wife, and two people as his wife's siblings." When Rinas learned that Canada had accepted her, her uncle shouted, "Be happy that you won the lottery, Rinas." The interviewer asked Rinas, "When you found out, did your uncle ask you if you wanted to go?" And she said, "He did not ask me. Like I said, it was a tough household, so I was too afraid to say anything otherwise.... I was thinking that I would be going to Kenya. I didn't even know." She had not even known that Canada was considering her, and "within a few weeks they told me that I would be leaving for Canada. I was not even ready."

Some refugees had to weave a web of secrets in order to achieve refugee status by, for example, "replacing" real family members lost to the war against Oromos. One must appreciate the generosity and risk assumed by those refugee families who willingly offered others the opportunity to join them. Nevertheless, joining an ad hoc family had consequences for participants. For women, joining an ad hoc family prevented them from being able to sponsor their real families, whom they left behind, and they cited this as a major barrier to their resettlement. In Hamilee's words, "I can't even say I'd like to sponsor my mother since I already have a mother here.... I can't even sponsor

my cousins because my 'dad' told a lot of different stories about his family perishing. So I just sit down and cry." Ultimately, when some women in our study landed in Canada, they had to bear the daunting reality that they would never live with their real families again, perhaps never even see them again.

Participants described how challenging it was to live as a refugee. Though they avoided refugee camps and the violence that can accompany them, often what happened during their period of being a refugee marked them for life. Despite the fact that women had suffered gravely for being Oromo in Ethiopia and could not return without threat to their lives, finding the option to resettle in Canada was not easy. Indeed, many were forced to sacrifice their connections to husbands, parents, siblings, and cousins to be able to migrate.

From Refugee to Citizen

Refugee women had to begin to shape their lives around resettlement long before they arrived in Canada. As a growing body of literature demonstrates (Labman, 2019; Labman et al., 2020), the process of applying for and gaining access to Canada's refugee resettlement program is long and arduous. Case in point, the Canadian government rejected Faynet and her family's application for resettlement to Canada because "[of] too many children and [they] don't accept big family" (Faynet). She became unexpectedly pregnant shortly after being rejected by the Canadian government. This led her to have an abortion because she was so concerned that an increase to her family size would forever prevent her family from being sponsored. While they were eventually resettled to Canada through private sponsorship, Faynet deeply regrets the abortion, which was done out of necessity rather than desire.

Preparing for Resettlement to Canada

The process of unbecoming a refugee begins with the orientation stage, which happens overseas. According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), refugee newcomers are offered orientation services abroad to help them better understand life in Canada and make informed resettlement decisions (IRCC, 2019). Interestingly, only the government-assisted refugees (Muna, Hamilee, Rinas, and Kuleeni) attended an orientation; Faynet and Dekka did not have this opportunity as privately sponsored refugees.

The orientations that Muna, Hamilee, Rinas, and Kuleeni attended lasted two to three days, and the women described similar experiences. When the interviewer asked them what they learned, Hamilee recalled being told that “Canada is really cold.... They told us to use the heater” and “that we had to respect our neighbours or that they [the neighbours] would call the police.” Rinas said

I [was told that I] needed to look for work because work will not come looking for me; and to look for work at various places and in the newspapers ... that Canada is not a big deal so don't take it as if it is a big deal. That Canada may be for me or it may not ... and they told us that there are problems in Canada.

The government that funds these services appeared to believe that several days is sufficient to give refugees the support they need to adapt to Canadian life—more specifically, basic information about geography, weather, and people, employment, education, and the law. These basics are certainly important, but they do not underscore the broader social issues that mark Canadian societies (e.g., illiteracy, poverty, racial discrimination, unemployment, and other social ills). Given the conditions and realities that the women escaped, and all the optimistic information they were given about Canada,

one would expect them to find their new lives easier and better. As we discuss below, this was not the case for the women in our study.

Prospects in Canada

When the interviewer asked the participants, “What could have better assisted you in the resettlement and integration process?,” their thoughts and reflections were surprising. Faynet and Dekka, who were privately sponsored, had a view of the resettlement process that was very different from Kuleeni, Muna, Hamilee, and Rinas, all of whom were government-sponsored refugees and had fewer challenges. These differences in difficulty may also reflect the fact that the former two had been settled in Canada longer than the latter four. Faynet, who was first among the participants to come to Canada, said,

Even if the church brings you or the government brings you, there should always be a place for newcomers that they can prepare them ... to let them know you are going to face these kinds of problems ... this is our culture ... don't be afraid ... don't be surprised you are going to face this kind of stuff and this kind of stuff ... this is the Canadian way. Everything. They should prepare you a little bit instead of on your own, suffering. At least [so] you don't face big things on your own, especially when you are a single mom.

She expressed feeling underprepared for navigating the challenges and uncertainties of life as a newcomer. These anxieties were particularly heightened when her husband left, and she became responsible for raising six children on her own.

Faynet shared her perspective that “in Canada, when refugees come for the first time, most separate or divorce or those kinds of stuff” and that “mostly the women [are made to] suffer with the children and culture and everything.” Likewise, Dekka recalled being abandoned by her husband, who was displeased about his loss of status in Canada.

She explained how he would say to her, “Did you bring me here to be a slave?” (Deka). One day he “said that he wasn’t feeling good ... and that he would go and come back. He never came back though” (Deka). She recounted, “With seven kids, life was very tough. Being a mother and a father after my husband left. Life was so very tough.” Both Faynet and Deka spoke in detail about the challenges they experienced with raising children in a foreign country with limited social and economic support. Faynet, who survived a civil war, trekked across multiple countries in search of refuge, and lost her first child all while she was a teenager, expressed through tears how none of her previous hardships compared to the suffering she experienced with resettling to Canada.

The world has changed drastically since Faynet and Deka were sponsored to Canada. Faynet was in the first wave of Africans seeking resettlement after Canada formally recognized refugees as a designated class of immigrants in Canadian law (Canadian Council for Refugees, n.d.). By amending previous immigration policies, which were classist, exploitative, and racist, the Immigration Act of 1976 permitted a significant number of non-European refugees to seek refuge in Canada (Dirks, 2020; Green & Green, 2004). Immigration from Africa grew exponentially during the 1980s and 1990s (Troper, 2021). Like Faynet, those who were among the first wave did not have pre-existing communities to join and had to form new communities amongst themselves. Even if Canadian communities had space for them and were willing to welcome them, these early reception communities did not have the resources or knowledge to successfully integrate a new population.

As Canadian society became more inclusive and pluralistic, subsequent waves of African refugees admitted into Canada’s

refugee resettlement program may have had an easier time. The Canada in which Kuleeni, Muna, Hamilee, and Rinas arrived (in 2006, 2010, 2010, and 2013, respectively) was different from the one Faynet and Deka came to (in 1989 and 2002, respectively). Changes in Canadian society, including the growth of diasporic communities of former refugees, could help to explain why participants who arrived later did not experience as much difficulty undergoing resettlement and integration. Differences in how they expressed their integration experiences may also be attributed to the ways in which they were sponsored (Hynie et al., 2019).

Regardless of when they arrived, participants shared similar, limited economic prospects in Canada. For the most part, they lacked sufficient education and the employment skills necessary to compete in the Canadian marketplace. Beiser (2003) found that pre-migration educational levels were associated with resettlement success. Five of the six women had received some formal education in their homeland (though less than what was typical for men), yet generally their formal educational achievement was minimal. At the time of the interviews, four of the women worked full-time in the cleaning industry and frequently juggled part-time jobs as well. Rinas was struggling to find employment, and Deka had worked only briefly since resettling in Canada because she had ongoing health problems. Not only were Faynet, Deka, and Muna responsible for financially supporting their children, they also felt obligated to support family members in their homeland—sometimes caring for an entire village. We deduce that gender-based dynamics, which limited their opportunities for formal education, coupled with personal and familial obligations, compromised their employability prospects for better paying and more rewarding jobs.

An intersectional lens allows us to analyze and understand how life-long gender dynamics play out so that refugee women remain at the margins of their new society. Anti-Oromo oppression (Gudina, 2007; Hasen, 2002; Jalata, 2005) and patriarchal culture colluded to isolate the Oromo women in our sample from educational opportunities in Ethiopia. Their lack of formal education and experience, coupled with their identities as mothers and former refugees, made it difficult for them to find rewarding and useful employment. As Kumsa (2005; 2006) has found, Oromos who come to Canada as refugees construct new identities and develop fluid ways to belong, but traumas from their earlier oppressions can continue to define their lives (Jaranson et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2006). For us, this raises the question about refugee men making headlines when they lose their upward mobility, while there are fewer stories on refugee women who have limited access to education or careers. In the same vein, refugee women are portrayed as being emancipated. We in Canada and academia should not be so content with the idea that refugee women are liberated, despite having limited opportunities for formal education or upward mobility.

Countering Remarginalization: A Discussion

Counter to studies that imply women become enfranchised after resettlement (Hyman et al., 2008; McSpadden & Moussa, 1993), the findings in this study suggest that the intersections between national origin, gender, and social class create conditions that set up refugee women to have limited opportunities for upward mobility. In this regard, the system has failed them by virtue of remarginalization. Although the women in this study were safer in Canada and did not live in fear of a bomb flying

through their window, they remained relegated to society's margins. Those who were employed held multiple menial jobs for survival, and the demands of their gendered lives thwarted opportunities to upgrade education and advance career skills. Their primary hope was for their children to enjoy more of the rewards that Canadian society has to offer.

Accordingly, future studies should investigate the prospects for upward mobility among children of former refugee women. What implications do the realities of former refugee women have on second- and third-generation immigrants? Are the experiences transposed onto the children of former refugees, who then internalize them and transpose them again onto their children? This may explain some of the difficulties plaguing young African immigrants living in Canada. Finally, there has to be a better way for former refugees to attain upward mobility.

Notwithstanding all the hardship that the women in this study had endured, they expressed genuine gratitude toward Canada. Faynet, Kuleeni, and Muna specifically appreciated opportunities for language training, economic stability, ability to send remittances, access to health care, and women's empowerment. Likely the women did not criticize the system because they compared their lives in Canada to their earlier times of hardship. Conversely, as an Oromo-Canadian raised in the Oromo diaspora in Canada, the first author is aware of the possibilities and benefits of dreaming for a better Canada and engendering change for a new wave of refugee women. In other words, we do not require our participants to change their perspectives, but we challenge society to transform in a way that perceives women's gendered needs differently. Here we see how intersectional approaches can help our

understanding of refugee women's experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Biftu Yousuf is a PhD candidate at York University. She can be reached at bmyousuf@yorku.ca

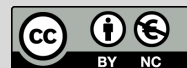
Nicole S. Berry is an associate professor at Simon Fraser University. She can be reached at nicole_berry@sfu.ca

REFERENCES

- Aberman, T. (2014). Gendered Perspectives on Refugee Determination in Canada. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 30(2), 57–66. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.39619>
- Bartolomei, L., Eckert, R., & Pittaway, E. (2014). "What happens there ... follows us here": Resettled but Still at Risk: Refugee Women and Girls in Australia. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 30(2), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.39618>
- Beiser, M. (2003). Sponsorship and resettlement success. *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'integration et de la migration internationale*, 4(2), 203–215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-003-1033-z>
- Benjamin, J.A. (1998). Issues of Power and Empowerment in Refugee Studies: Rwandan Women's Adaptive Behaviour at Benaco Refugee Camp. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 17(4), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21979>
- Berman, H., Girón, E.R.I., & Marroquín, A.P. (2006). A narrative study of refugee women who have experienced violence in the context of war. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research Archive*, 38(4), 31–53. <https://cjr.archive.mcgill.ca/article/view/2018>
- Beswick, S. (2001). "If You Leave Your Country You Have No Life!" Rape, Suicide, and Violence: The Voices of Ethiopian, Somali, and Sudanese Female Refugees in Kenyan Refugee Camps. *Northeast African Studies*, 8(3), 69–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.2006.0003>
- Bhugra, D., & Becker, M.A. (2005). Migration, cultural bereavement and cultural identity. *World Psychiatry*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1414713/>
- Bulcha, M. (2011). Contours of the emergent & ancient Oromo nation: Dilemmas in the Ethiopian politics of state and nation-building.
- Caux, H. (2011). Death on the Mediterranean. . In and others (Ed.), *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2011/5/4dcd3b009/death-on-the-mediterranean.html>
- Creese, G., & Wiebe, B. (2012). 'Survival Employment': Gender and Deskillling among African Immigrants in Canada. *International Migration*, 50(5), 56–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00531.x>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167. <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1241. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dauvergne, C. (2006). Reflections on Gendering Canada's Refugee Process. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 23(2), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21361>
- Dirks, G. (2020). Immigration Policy. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/immigration-policy>
- Fossati, B., Namarra, L., & Niggli, P. (1996). The new rulers of Ethiopia and the persecution of the Oromo: Reports from the Oromo refugees in Djibouti. .
- Grabska, K. (2006). Marginalization in Urban Spaces of the Global South: Urban Refugees in Cairo. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(3), 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel014>
- Green, A., & Green, D. (2004). The goals of Canada's immigration policy: A historical perspective. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 13(1), 102–139. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44320798>
- Gudina, M. (2007). Ethnicity, Democratisation and Decentralization in Ethiopia: The Case of Oromia. *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review*, 23(1), 81–106. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eas.2007.0000>
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>
- Hassen, M. (2002). Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Conditions in Ethiopia, ca. 1880s–2002. *Northeast African Studies*, 9(3), 15–49. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.2007.0013>
- Hassen, M. (2015). *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia*. Boydell & Brewer: Boydell and Brewer Limited.
- Henze, P.B. (2000). *Layers of time: A history of Ethiopia*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-11786-1_10
- HumanRightsWatch, Committee, I.C.M., & of Churches, W.C. (2001). NGO background paper on the refugee and migration interface. https://www.hrw.org/reports/ngo_refugee.pdf
- Hyman, I., Guruge, S., & Mason, R. (2008). The Impact of Migration on Marital Relationships: A Study of Ethiopian Immigrants in Toronto. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 39(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.39.2.149>
- Hyman, I., Guruge, S., Mason, R., Gould, J., Stuckless, N., Tang, T., Teffera, H., & Mekonnen, G. (2004). Post-migration changes in gender relations among Ethiopian couples living in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research Archive*, 36(4), 74–89. <https://cjr.archive.mcgill.ca/article/view/1912>
- Hynie, M., McGrath, S., Bridekirk, J., Oda, A., Ives, N., Hyndman, J., Arya, N., Shakya, Y.B., Hanley, J., & McKenzie, K. (2019). What Role Does Type of Sponsorship Play in Early Integration Outcomes? Syrian Refugees Resettled in Six Canadian Cities. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 35(2), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1064818ar>
- Jacobsen, K. (2006). Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Urban Areas: A Livelihoods Perspective. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(3), 273–286. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel017>
- Jalata, A. (1996). The Struggle for Knowledge: The Case of Emergent Oromo Studies. *African Studies Review*, 39(2), 95–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/525437>
- Jalata, A. (2005). State Terrorism and Globalization. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, 46(1-2), 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715205054471>

- Jalata, A., & Schaffer, H. (2013). The Oromo, Gadaa/Siqqee Democracy and the Liberation of Ethiopian Colonial Subjects. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 9(4), 277–295. <https://doi.org/10.1177/117718011300900401>
- Jaranson, J.M., Butcher, J., Halcon, L., Johnson, D.R., Robertson, C., Savik, K., Spring, M., & Westermeyer, J. (2004). Somali and Oromo Refugees: Correlates of Torture and Trauma History. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94(4), 591–598. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.94.4.591>
- Kumsa, M.K. (2005). Between home & exile: Dynamics of negotiating belonging among young Oromos living in Toronto. In Tetey, W.J., & Pupilampu, K.P. (Eds.), *The African diaspora in Canada: Negotiating identity and belonging* (pp. 175–203). University of Calgary Press.
- Kumsa, M.K. (2006). 'No! I'm Not a Refugee!' The Poetics of Belonging among Young Oromos in Toronto. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(2), 230–255. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel001>
- Labman, S. (2019). *Crossing law's border: Canada's refugee resettlement program*. UBC Press.
- Labman, S., Cameron, G., & C (Eds.). (2020). *Strangers to neighbours: Refugee sponsorship in context*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Landau, L.B. (2006). Protection and Dignity in Johannesburg: Shortcomings of South Africa's Urban Refugee Policy. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(3), 308–327. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fel012>
- LaViolette, N. (2007). Gender-Related Refugee Claims: Expanding the Scope of the Canadian Guidelines. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 19(2), 169–214. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eem008>
- Makwarimba, E., Stewart, M., Simich, L., Makumbe, K., Shizha, E., & Anderson, S. (2013). Sudanese and Somali Refugees in Canada: Social Support Needs and Preferences. *International Migration*, 51(5), 106–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12116>
- McSpadden, L.A., & Moussa, H. (1993). I Have a Name: The Gender Dynamics in Asylum and in Resettlement of Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees in North America. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 6(3), 203–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/6.3.203>
- Morrison, J., Crosland, B., & Working paper no. 39. (2001). The trafficking and smuggling of refugees: The end game in European asylum policy? . <https://www.unhcr.org/research/working/3af66c9b4/trafficking-smuggling-refugees-end-game-european-asylum-policy-john-morrison.html>
- Palys, T., & Atchison, C. (2013). Qualitative Research in the Digital Era: Obstacles and Opportunities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4), 352–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100404>
- Pittaway, E., & Bartolomei, L. (2001). Refugees, Race, and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 19(6), 21–32. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21236>
- Pittaway, E., Muli, C., & Shteir, S. (2009). "I Have a Voice—Hear Me!" Findings of an Australian Study Examining the Resettlement and Integration Experience of Refugees and Migrants from the Horn of Africa in Australia. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 26(2), 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.32084>
- Robertson, C.L., Halcon, L., Savik, K., Johnson, D., Spring, M., Butcher, J., Westermeyer, J., & Jaranson, J. (2006). Somali and Oromo refugee women: trauma and associated factors. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 56(6), 577–587. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2006.04057.x>
- Sherrell, K., D'Addario, S., & Hiebert, D. (2007). On the Outside Looking In: The Precarious Housing Situations of Successful Refugee Claimants in the GVRD. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 24(2), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.21385>
- Stewart, M., Makwarimba, E., Beiser, M., Neufeld, A., Simich, L., & Spitzer, D. (2010). Social support and health: Immigrants' and refugees' perspectives. *Diversity in Health and Care*, 7(2), 91–103.
- Tronvoll, K. (2008). Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia: When Ethnic Identity is a Political Stigma. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 15(1), 49–79. <https://doi.org/10.1163/138548708x272528>
- Troper, H. (2021). Immigration to Canada. . <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/immigration>
- UNHCR (2011). The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. <https://www.unhcr.org/about-us/background/4ec262df9/1951-convention-relating-status-refugees-its-1967-protocol.html>
- Veale, A. (2003). *From child soldier to ex-fighter, female fighters, demobilisation and reintegration in Ethiopia*. (Monograph no. 85 ed). Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrika.org/research/monographs/monograph-85-from-child-soldier-to-ex-fighter-female-fighters-demobilisation-and-reintegration-in-ethiopia-angela-veale>

This open access work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).



This license allows for non-commercial use, reproduction and adaptation of the material in any medium or format, with proper attribution.