

Post Migration Experience of Somali Female Refugees in the United States: A Case Study of Atlanta, Georgia

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In America today, there are many thriving Somali communities located in both large diverse metropolitan areas and smaller mono-ethnic cities. The United States, which did not have a previously significant migration history with Somalia, became a destination that was likely, in part, a result of military involvement in 1992. In recent years, Somalis were identified by the United States Homeland Security Department as representing the largest refugee group (25%) being resettled in the United States. This population is primarily Muslim, arriving from a region of the world that has alleged links with Islamic terrorist groups.

My research involves examining the post migration experience from a woman's perspective. This study illuminates specific economic and social challenges faced by Somali female refugees as they attempt to adapt and integrate into American society.

Often Muslim women are more "visible" in the predominately Anglo-Christian American society due to their attire, thus making their adaptation/assimilation process potentially even more complex. Wearing either a head scarf or Islamic dress, women can be quickly identified as "outsiders." This can lead to such problems as an inability to gain employment, exclusion from mainstream society due to perceived "differences," or to becoming the recipient of outright hostility in the public sphere. Adding to these challenges in America, is the potential for Somali women to also suffer racial discrimination due to their dark skin color.

Notably, refugee women face many obstacles in their integration process that differ significantly from their male counterparts. This includes such concerns as employment, childcare responsibilities, and health care issues. Many female refugees lack English fluency, are accompanied by several dependents, and have a myriad of both physical and mental health problems. Their journey to America has often occurred under extreme duress, frequently these women have endured significant war traumas, such as rape, food shortages, separation from loved ones, as well as having witnessed brutal killings and attacks. Importantly, these women have the strength and fortitude to take charge of their families and attempt to rebuild their lives abroad when given the chance.

After visiting several different Somali communities located in various cities in the United States for three summers (2005-07), the



Atlanta, Georgia, metropolitan area was selected as a representative field site because it has a significant, stable Somali population (approximately 5,000) as well as having been in existence for approximately twenty years. I found Somali community leaders, all of whom were male, eager to assist me in this research project, however gaining access to conduct a survey questionnaire with female respondents presented a challenge. Finally, I was put into contact with female community leaders and access to this group was established. Using data collected from survey questionnaires during early 2008, both qualitative and quantitative analysis was conducted, resulting in a comprehensive study of this group's adjustment and adaptation to life in America.

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