African Canadian

Analysis of Social Networks, Exclusion and Economic Participation of Somali Immigrant Women in the GTA

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The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics indicates that women account for approximately 50 percent of the world's forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR 2013). Factors that precipitate the migration of women are predominately a result of political and social violence such as genocide and/or civil war (Moore & Shellman 599). In Canada, increased migration of Somali women is connected to the 1991 civil war in Somalia. Women attempting to escape Somalia's bloody political strife and begin anew in Canada were subjected to a wide range of social, economic, and cultural challenges as a result of their flight (Mohamed 52). Due to cultural shock, social isolation, and linguistic barriers, Somali women experience severe difficulties integrating into the Canadian labour market. As a result of this, they are forced to turn to their social networks to cope with barriers and to seek economic opportunities. This study will examine the dynamics of social networks and their capacity to reduce socio-economic and linguistic barriers, and increase the economic participation of Somali immigrant women in the Greater Toronto Area. It will do so by conducting primary and secondary research to examine the features of social support, ethnic

economies, and 'enterprising selves', which stem from social networks.

The civil war in Somalia resulted in a (large/staggering) influx of refugees arriving and settling in Canada (as well as in various other Western countries). Between 1988-1996, female Somali refugees (along with men and children) arriving to Canada exceeded 55,000. The most recent data on the Somali Canadian population reveals that there are approximately 70, 000 (Abdulle 1999). Of this number, a majority of Somali immigrants choose to live in the GTA. The Somali population residing in the GTA currently numbers 18, 440 (Mensah & Williams 2015). The strikingly large number of Somali immigrants in Canada makes it home to the largest Somali community outside Somalia (Abdulle 1999).

Despite the large presence of Somali-Canadians, minimal research has been conducted on them as a group, and especially on Somali-Canadian women. Scholars have predominantly focused on differences between immigrant and refugee communities, rather than on investigating the unique resettlement challenges faced by refugees in their host country (Mohamed 52). As a result of this lack of empirical data, there is a limited understanding of the challenges experienced by Somali women in Canada. In fact, Somali-Canadian women are often stereotyped as unemployed and uneducated, and face stigma and racial discrimination. Additional research on Somali immigrant women in Canada is imperative to better understand how women overcome initial socio-economic barriers, as a result of cultural, technological, and linguistic barriers.

The research design in this study employs both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary research was essential because of the limited existing data on Somali immigrant women in the GTA. The location where the primary data was conducted was *Suuqa Ceelgaab*—a Somali shopping centre located in Rexdale in Toronto. *Suuga Ceelgaab* is an Indian owned complex which consists of roughly 100 retail units available for rent. Considering the large

number of Somalis residing in the Rexdale area, Somali women occupy all of the rental units available in *Suuqa Ceelgaab*. In this study, primary research consisted of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Over the course of 4 months, 15 hours a week were spent in *Suuqa Ceelgaab* examining the products sold in the market and the experience of the women. The researcher's ability to speak and understand Somali eliminated possible language barriers and allowed the researcher to conduct informal interviews. Casual conversations through group discussions as well as individual conversations allowed the women to speak of their experiences and perceptions of life in the GTA. In total, fifty women were interviewed individually and each group discussion consisted of 15 informants. This method enabled the researcher to examine the perceptions of isolation, based on the presence of close family in Toronto, their perceptions of integration in their experiences with language learning, and perceptions of inclusion and exclusion in Canadian society.

Secondary sources provided a comparative analysis between Somali women and other immigrant women in the GTA. A number of journals on Canadian Chinese and South Asian immigrant women allowed for an examination of the development and impact of social networks and how they might foster economic activity. Secondary research also reveals the ways in which immigrants face challenges and barriers as a result of race and gender and how they overcome these to become catalysts for economic activity. For this study, the concepts of 'ethnic economies' and 'enterprising selves' were borrowed from Chinese and South Asian Canadian scholars to further illustrate and examine the economic activity of Somali Canadian women.

Study Findings

Results from primary and secondary research reveal that establishing a sense of belonging amongst Somali immigrant women

through social networks is an important means of overcoming socio-economic barriers. Social networks create social support and help alleviate experiences of loneliness and alienation Somali women may encounter upon arriving in the GTA (Lynam 327). Subsequent to fleeing the civil war in Somalia, most women arriving to Canada did not speak the two Canadian national languages, English and French. An inability to speak English and/or French hinders integration into Canadian society by limiting the capacity for women to navigate Canadian institutions and to find work (Lynam 328). Women at *Suuqa Ceelgaab* expressed that linguistic barriers are the predominant cause of feelings of isolation and exclusion. They expressed frustration due to the lack of available translators provided by the state, as well as existing discrimination when attempting to seek employment in the labour market. Numerous women illustrated that they were often turned down by potential employers and/or deemed unqualified, in spite of their training and experience. For instance, a qualified nurse expressed her frustration after being told her heavy accent would limit patient-nurse communication. "I came to Canada so that I could work for my children and provide them with a better and more promising life. It was hard for me to find out that despite my qualifications, finding work would be difficult," said Asha, owner of store number 22. Feelings of exclusion and perceptions of being unwelcome in the host country significantly discourage immigrant women from seeking employment in the Canadian labour market (Lynam 327).

Social networks bridge the gap between non-English or French speaking individuals and Canadian institutions by making information more accessible. Women are able to reach out to members of the community who speak the national languages and use them as translators. The most common technique to demonstrate this is through examining first and second-generation Somalis. For instance, participant observation reveal that Canadian-born Somali youth frequently became translators for non-English speaking Soma-

li parents, friends and family. In this instance, immigrants were able to access information (such as English training opportunities) and were able to communicate their needs more thoroughly, whenever they experienced difficulty doing so.

Additionally, social networks also increase the feeling of belonging by bringing together communities of Somali women living in the GTA and allowing them to hold on to their tradition. The Somali women all said they were part of a tight-knit Somali community in Toronto. A close-knit Somali community and experiences of solidarity increase the likelihood of cultural retention. It allowed women to assimilate into the new Canadian environment without forcing them to let go of their familiar customs and traditions, thus reducing the likelihood of feeling completely alienated (Lynam 327). Tight-knit Somali communities also empower women both personally and professionally. Feelings of belonging encourage women to find employment by making information more accessible (Lynam 327).

The ethnic economy, the concept of gaining capital through social networks, is a positive consequence of social networks as it generates greater economic participation amongst Somali immigrant women (Lucia &Wang 1). Women in the *Suuqa Ceelgaab* market expressed the sizeable impact and benefits of the ethnic economy, as well as its direct correlation to their employment opportunities. Similarly, in the Chinese community, the ethnic economy is forged on trust and communal connections. It provides informal forms of financial assistance to immigrants and has allowed for the establishment of various Somali businesses in the GTA (Lucia &Wang 1). A majority of the women studied at the *Suuqa Ceelgaab* market belonged to a rotating credit association organized and run by Somali Canadian women. Women are required to prepare agreed upon funds monthly. Each month a different participant of the group will receive all the raised funds. Ethnic economies function on a local scale and only include Somali women who live in the GTA. The lo-

cality of the ethnic economy increases its strength because it ensures that those who are members are pressured to meet payment due dates. This way, women using their social networks are able to both transfer and draw monetary funds to start up business without the need to access formal financial institutions.

In addition to providing monetary funds to start businesses, ethnic economies also reflect the strong desire for Somali immigrant women to become businesswomen and seek work despite the experience of gender and racial discrimination in Toronto.

> Entrepreneurship is now widely recognized as a way in which immigrants can adapt to some of the social and economic trends that affect them directly, including discrimination, lack of qualifications, industrial restructuring, unemployment, welfare retrenchment and labour market deregulation (Pe´coud 59).

Somali immigrant women are able to benefit from being part of their 'ethnic' group regardless of potent challenging barriers. Solidarity amongst the women permits the flow of ethnic resources such as, "values, knowledge, skills, information, attitudes, leadership, solidarity, an orientation to sojourning, and institutions" (Pe´coud 62). It also reduces costly transportation costs and permits the circulation of information and access to reliable business partners (Pe´coud 62).

As well as increasing feelings of belongingness and the formation of ethnic economies, social networks may also lead to the "Enterprising Selves" discourse. In the article 'Redefining "Enterprising Selves": Exploring The "Negotiation" Of South Asian Immigrant Women Working As Home-Based Enclave Entrepreneurs, author Srabani Maitra (19) defines "Enterprising Selves" as such:

> An enterprising individual is constructed as an independent, self-regulated person who aspires to autonomy, desires, personal fulfillment‖, believes in individual responsibility and find[s] meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice.

Maitra illustrates this concept of enterprising self in the figure of the South Asian immigrant woman, her experience and the ways in which she copes with and overcomes linguistic and discriminatory barriers. Similar to Somali women, South Asian immigrants are also limited by socio-economic obstacles that hinder integration into Canadian society. However, both groups differ in notable ways; for instance, for the most part, South Asian women hold degrees and professional experience upon arriving to Canada, while most Somali women do not (Maitra 4). Despite their educational and profession-al backgrounds, the gendered and racialized nature of the Canadian labour market limits equal access into the workplace (Maitra 4). As a result, South Asian women immigrants are predominantly forced to stay at home and fulfill domestic duties while they rely on their husbands as breadwinner (Maitra 4).

Despite such differences both South Asian and Somali immi-grant groups experience difficulties accessing employment in the mainstream labour sector in the GTA. To combat this, both groups are forced to create socio-economic opportunities for themselves. This is done through the selling and buying of traditional clothing and artifacts (Maitra 4). The concept of "Enterprising Selves", por-trays immigrant women as they truly are productive, responsible, independent and hardworking citizens not solely depend on state assistance (Maitra 1). Amongst Somali immigrant women, *Suuqa Ceelgaab* reflects the Enterprising Selves discourse. The market holds approximately 100 small shops where women sell traditional and cultural clothing and artifacts. When entering the mall, one can see an array of traditional wear long cultural dresses hung on the walls, as well as drums and popular perfumes on display.

Conclusion

During the primary data collection phase several questions were asked in informal conversations to evaluate immigrant wom-

en's perception of integration and the effectiveness of community organizations. The study's findings are similar to those mentioned in Hopkins article, *Somali Community Organizations in London and Toronto: Collaboration and Effectiveness.* Observations include that women feel marginalized and underrepresented in these organizations despite their mission to increase immigrant assimilation. Additionally, women highlighted that most Somali community organizations are limited in building a united and collective voice for Somali refugee women. They do not sufficiently focus on the unique challenges women face upon arriving to Canada, and fail to offer women support in crucial areas.

This study examined the impact of social networks in the Somali immigrant community in the GTA. Through primary and secondary data collection, social networks were revealed to be vital in alleviating the socio-economic and linguistic obstacles experienced by Somali immigrant women in Toronto. Social networks provide women with the social support needed to reduce the experience of loneliness and alienation. It is essential because it increases access to information, enables immigrants to communicate more effectively with Canadian institutions, and allows for cultural retention. In addition, ethnic economies are also essential in helping immigrant women to integrate into the Canadian labour market. Ethnic economies generate the funds and communal ties necessary to start a business amongst Somali women. Finally the concept of "enterprising selves" is a final way that illustrates the ways in which social networks help overcome barriers.

To further ensure that Somali women continue engaging in the economy, it is essential that further research be conducted to evaluate the impact of social networks. Further research will also reveal the impact of social networks and the ways in which they increase the economic participation of women by creating a sense of belonging, resulting in ethnic economies, and by encouraging women to become productive in Canadian society. Policy prescriptions should

attempt to eliminate the barriers that may continue to hinder economic participation. These include; the lack of available translators, as well as the failure to acknowledge the unique challenges women experience as a result of gender and racial differences.

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