

# Forced Migration

## The Experiences of Somali Women Living in the United Kingdom

### Abstract

This research was designed in response to the expressed concerns of a group of refugee Somali women who had strong views about the acute needs of their fellow women and what needed to be explored. The study focused on Somali women living in Birmingham in the West Midlands, UK. It is estimated that in 2006 there were about 35,000 Somalis living in this area, about 50% of them women (Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) 2006).

Little is known about Somali refugee women but contextualising their new life circumstances with their previous experiences can facilitate an understanding of the issues they face and help to explain why the women have experienced resettlement in the ways that they have.

Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, 33 women participated in the research. Data were collected between 2006 and 2008 using individual interviews or focus groups. Data were analysed using Giorgi's (1975) four stages of phenomenological data analysis.

The essences that emerged during data analysis revealed that although all of the women had shared similar migration journeys forced migration had impacted on them differently. It was clear that although some women were adapting well, moving towards a state of recovery, others remained trapped on a downward spiral of loss, in a state of anomie. The differences were so significant that the term running differently was used to describe them.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study argues that the homogenising discourse assumed by the official views of refugee women is problematic. Rather than facilitating attachment to, and integration into British society, the overarching social policies may, in some instances, inadvertently reinforce the barriers that prevent Somali refugee women from adapting to their new environment and rebuilding their lives. This has important implications for all working with Somali refugee women.

Professionals, if they are to meet the needs of these women, need a practical framework which enables them to recognise and work with the inherent differences between the groups of women. The downward spiral of loss model, developed, does this and can be applied at all levels of practice. It illustrates how and why the different groups develop, and why, the one-dimensional view of refugee women often portrayed in the literature as well as in policy documentation is inappropriate.

To continue with policies and practice, that endorse the 'one size fits all approach', will mean that many Somali women will continue to remain trapped in a downward spiral of loss and trauma, thus missing out on the opportunity to rebuild their lives.

# Forced Migration: The Experiences of Somali Women Living in the United Kingdom

## Context

This research explored the journey of a group of Somali refugee women and presents an account of their experiences before, during and after migration to England. The study also aimed to explore the strategies used by the women in adapting to their new environment, the aim being to make recommendations that might inform policy and service provision. The original impetus for this study came from meeting and tutoring Somali refugee women who had strong views about the acute needs of their fellow women and what needed to be explored.

Somalis have a long established presence in the United Kingdom (UK) with women constituting nearly 50 per cent of the Somali refugee population but they have remained absent from much of the official statistics largely because 'Somali' is rarely recognised as a distinct ethnic category. Whilst Somali women constitute one of the largest groups of refugee women in the UK, and there are a few studies which primarily focus on the women's reproductive health (Essen et al. 2010; Maternity Alliance 2009) in other respects they have remained invisible. These issues of identity serve to reinforce the invisibility of the Somali population in official statistics. The official estimate of 108,000 (Office for National Statistics 2010) is likely to be a gross under representation of the true total of the Somali community with estimates from other sources, suggesting figures up to 500,000 (Communities and Local Government 2009). Consequently, when decisions are being made in relation to addressing the needs of newly arrived refugees, those who originate from Somalia may be neglected.

This can cause problems later on as it is known that the mental and physical health of refugees often deteriorates two to three years after they arrive in the UK (Carswell et al. 2011) with



women being over represented in those who are most susceptible to poor physical and psychological ill health.

The Somali population in the UK faces multiple forms of disadvantage, including considerable poverty, poor housing conditions and significant barriers to training and employment (Communities and Local Government 2009). Somali women are more likely than men to be disadvantaged as traditional cultural norms and the language barrier can marginalise them in terms of the wider society (Gardner and El Buhsra 2004; Harris 2004).

## Methodology

This study was concerned with giving voice to a group of women who had little opportunity to make their voices heard. It was considered crucial to the aims of the research that the methodology chosen would, as far as possible, reflect the complex nature of the women's experiences, mirroring the women's description of experiences. As the goal of descriptive phenomenology is description of the meaning of an experience from the perspective of those who have had that experience (Husserl 1931), it offered the opportunity to make known the lived experiences of this group.

This approach to phenomenology calls for researchers to suspend all prior knowledge of the phenomena being investigated in order to prevent any judgement from distorting the data. In this study it was acknowledged that the researcher was ethnically and culturally dissimilar to the women that she was studying. She recognised the impossibility of fully suspending, even temporarily, preconceived knowledge about the women's experiences of migration. Giorgi (1970) has explained that although it is impossible to make explicit all of the characteristics of the researcher's approach, it is useful to make explicit whatever one can.

Feminists, in particular, have made the call for a need to make explicit the ways in which the different identities of the researcher may influence research encounters, processes and outcomes (Vanderback 2005; hooks 1987 and Collins 1986). The term positionality was developed to formalise recognition of the impact of the researcher on the research process and research outcomes (Hopkins 2007). A critical reflexive stance, which paid close attention to the researchers own positionality, was therefore a crucial aspect of this study.

However, there is a paucity of literature of the risks and negative emotions associated with the process of data analysis (Li and Seale 2007). It would appear that reading a transcript or listening to a disembodied voice, which has been recorded, is not generally perceived to be as emotionally demanding as undertaking interviews. The researchers own experience during the data analysis process testifies to the fallacy of this. This experience has brought home to her the importance of researchers having the relevant background to work with emotionally demanding data and having access to expert debriefing and support.

## Findings

Given the complex and multiple essences which emerged from the data it was not appropriate to present these essences thematically because this stripped out the integration and interaction between the essences, and, therefore the context would be lost. A framework began to emerge (see figure one; Downwards Spiral of Loss) which could take account of the

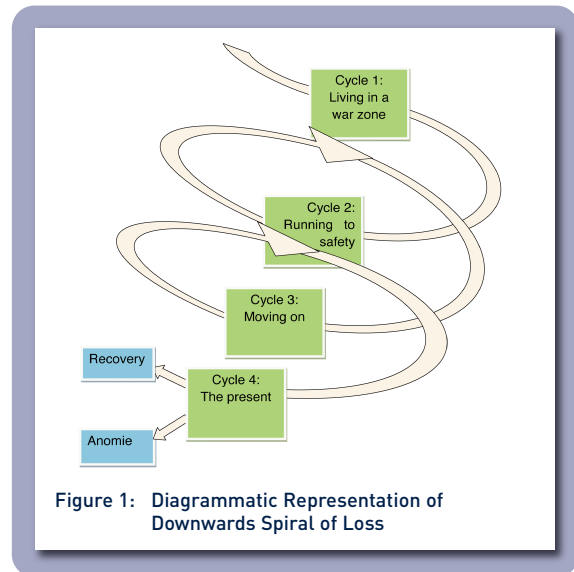


Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of Downwards Spiral of Loss

multifarious and compounding nature of the impact of migration on the women.

The first cycle living in a war zone describes the women's experiences as they lived in a conflict zone. The second of the cycles 'Running to safety' portrays the women's migratory experiences, as they fled their country to seek safety and security across Somalia's borders. The third cycle 'Moving on' depicts the women's flight to the West. 'The Present', the fourth and final cycle, focuses on the last element of the downward spiral of loss, moving from the journeys undertaken by the women, to their situation at the time of the study. It is in this final cycle that a distinct difference between the women begins to emerge. It was clear that some women remained trapped on a downward spiral of loss and trauma and so their lives could be summarised as being in a state of 'anomie'. Others were able to replenish their stocks of social capital (Bourdieu 1986) and were moving towards a state of 'recovery', as they adapted to their changed life circumstances.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Traditionally policies that impact on the lives of refugees and asylum seeking women have advocated 'a one size fits all' approach (UK Border Agency 2011). However, as this study has shown, at best, this is a compromise as forced migration impacts differently on the women. It is therefore recommended that:

- i. Immigration officers and other staff who meet with the women at the point of entry have access to resources, and training, so that they can work within an appropriate cultural frame, acknowledging differences as well as similarities.
- ii. Extreme care is taken when using interpreters, in not only matching language and dialect, but also recognition of the fact that inter-clan or cross party conflicts may mean some interpreters are not acceptable.
- iii. Accessible information be provided regarding the women's rights and entitlements and a community support worker be assigned to help the women acclimatise to their new host country.

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