

Chapter 13. Cultural Adaptation of Somali Female Asylum Seekers in Isparta

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Introduction

Due to the civil war that broke out in Somalia in early 1990s, a lot of Somali people had to flee the country and Turkey has been one of the popular destinations for asylum seekers. Report of UNHRC (2016) total 3.849 Somali asylum-seeker and refugees have been reported to be residing in Turkey. Isparta, which has been selected as a satellite city for Somali asylum seekers. Many of these people have been living in Isparta for a long time without knowing what future holds for them. Since Syrian war has been in the centre of attention for many researchers and officials, the state of Somali asylum seekers has been neglected as an issue of interest. Especially, women, who are one of the most disadvantaged groups both in society and at war time, are very much understudied. For this reason, this study aims to shed a light on the migration histories and living conditions of Somali women who are living in the province of Isparta, in Turkey.

Literature Review

The asylum seekers may be from different parts of the world, but cultural issues, mental health, grief and trauma, family reunification, education and communication skills, as well as material needs relating to employment and housing, are still high on the agenda (Nash et al, 2016). Psychological and physical wellbeing of asylum seeker women is crucial during adaptation process to host country. Forced migrants can often find themselves in places where they have no pre-existing contacts and may have limited knowledge of the language. It is clear that forced displacements, conflicts, human rights violations, and wars can have a severe impact on the mental health of people affected. Post traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety are very frequent among these groups. Thus it is crucial to provide complete psychological support during the integration process of women asylum seekers into the host society. Psychological support can encompass, providing support, counselling, healthcare to individuals, helping them cope with their traumatic experience, working with minority groups with a view to fostering and promoting their own coping mechanisms and helping rebuild community ties (Sansonettil, 2016).

At the beginning of integration process asylum seekers experience all main of effects of cultural shock. They have to establish a balance between internal and external environment; original ideas, rules and behavioral models related to requirements of environment. The consequence of social role reconstruction and

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self-identification is a feeling of inferiority or inability to master new ethno-cultural environment (Khaliman, 2012). Except these dynamics language barriers and cultural differences also posed significant difficulties and negatively affected the speed of integration.

Traditionally integration has been measured by a variety of indicators language use, labor market participation and residential patterns. Residential patterns produce fewer interactions with the majority population and consequently hinder asylum seeker's sense of belonging and incorporation in to the host society (Valentine et al, 2009). Nagel and Staeheli (2008) argue that it is not enough to understand asylum seeker's sense of attachment to and integration in, a host society from data or observation alone. As Nagel and Staeheli (2008), integration is not about 'where' asylum seeker and minorities live, but how they understand their membership in the places where they live, work and raise families. According to Khaliman (2012), the main objective at the stage of asylum seekers' integration is to reach such adaptive result, which strengthens and restores their identity and construct the consistent adaptive space acceptable socially and ethnic identity on a scale of ethnicity indicators. psychologically.

Asylum seekers have not obtained the refugee status and therefore live in uncertainty in the host country. This condition hinders, the asylum seekers' integration into the host country. For example, for women in particular, all of this is even more difficult if we consider that they can be mothers of stateless children when their kids were born outside the country of origin and may not enjoy any status recognised by the host country (Sansonetti, 2016). Host countries have to consider the needs and be aware of the vulnerabilities of refugee and asylum-seeking women because female refugees in host countries are expected by their communities to embody all the reminiscences of the country of origin as care for children, household care, language, and food: this role attributed to them by men in their families (husbands, fathers, brothers) has a severe impact on the integration process, fostering isolation and social, economic, and cultural dependency (Sharma, 2011).

Methodology

In the scope of the research, focus group study is conducted with 9 Somali Women. Before the focus group, a Topic Guide is prepared. In the Topic Guide, the following questions were present:

TOPIC GUIDE

Socio-Demographic and Individual Information

Age

Gender

Educational Level

Household Size

Place of Residence

Are all the family members living in Turkey right now? IF not, where are they?
IF so, which members are living in Turkey?

How is your health in general? Do you have chronic diseases? Are you able to benefit from the health services in Turkey?

Do you have a job?

What is your income?

Do you get any financial support or benefit?

Before Migration

What kind of life were you leading in Somalia before you migrated? Can you tell me as far as you can remember?

What were the reasons for migration?

Why did you choose Turkey?

Migration Process

What is your experience during migration?

After Migration

What kind of problems did you experience when you first came to Turkey?

When you think about your life in Turkey, how do you evaluate your relationship with

your neighbourhood and social environment?

your relatives and family?

Isparta residents?

Are you happy in general with the life you have in Turkey?

Have you ever been discriminated against in Turkey?

What are your future aspirations?

Would you like to go back to your country or would you like to stay here in Turkey?

Recruitment of the Participants and Data Collection Process

Most of Somali women asylum seeker stated that inability to speak Turkish is a critical barrier to communicate with local people. One of the researchers knew the father of a Somali girl, who could provide contact with Somali women living in Isparta. A prior meeting was held with this 14 year-old Somali girl, who both spoke Arabic and Turkish. After speaking with her, she agreed to find Somali women for the research and volunteered to do simultaneous interpretation for the researchers. The gate keeper (14 year-old Somali girl) contacted women in advance and explained the research. The researchers and the gate keeper went to pick up the participants

Emerging Themes

Novelty of The Past: Beautiful and Happy Somalia

Somali women interviewed who were old enough to remember their homeland described it as playing a powerful part in their own self-identities however younger Somalis think that Somalia plays in their identities is more abstract (Valentine et al, 2009). Most of the women described Somalia as a beautiful and happy country. They remembered being happy in Somalia before they left. Even though the conditions that they lived in were tough, they stated that they felt comfortable and free in their own land.

“Life was so nice in Somalia back then. I was young. I used to grow tomatoes in my garden. There was not much (financially) but we were happy.” (H. U., 55)

Trauma of the Lost: Broken Families

Most of the women who participated in the focus group study stated that they have lost a relative or family member during the civil or during the migration process. As the men were mainly fighting in the civil war, the husbands, brothers and sons of most of the women were deceased. Women were either left with children or by themselves.

- “My husband died at war. They killed my brother and nephew right in front my eyes.” (H.U, 55).
- “My husband dies in Somalia. When the war broke out, I went to Saudi Arabia. I lost all of my children (5) during war.... I came to Turkey and found 2 of my children. 3 of them are still lost.” (F. A. 49).
- “I am living with my husband and smallest daughter. My older daughter lives in Konya and one of my sons in Ankara. I have one son in Netherlands and we are hoping to reunite with him”. (S.H. 51)
- “I am the only one here. Half of my children live in Yemen and the other half lives in America” (N.İ., 54)

Living in the Pension: Building a Sense of Community

Most of the women participants stated that they are living in a pension designed for asylum seekers. In this guesthouse, only women and children are residing. Women state that other women who live with them in this pension became their family. They talk about their pain and sorrow with each other, they share memories, they laugh together and they cry together. Living together has helped them to stay strong and hold on to each other. In other words, living together has a therapeutic effect on all the women.

- “We are lucky that we are all living together in the pension (guesthouse). We share our sorrows and we cry together. We reminisce the good old times and we laugh together. We always support each other” (Z. M., 23).

Financial Strains: Living on Benefits

Most of the Somali women did not have husbands and they did not work as it is not a characteristic of Somali culture. Only one women's husband was working as a shop assistant and had a regular income. Apart from her, all of the women were living on the council benefit, which is a 50 Turkish Liras per month. Regarding that minimum wage in Turkey is around 1000 TL, it can be argued that this benefit is very meagre. On the other hand, these women do not pay rent to this pension which is owned by the municipality. And yet, 3 times a day food is served for free in this pension. Even though basic living needs of the women are met, it is not sufficient to just bed and feed these women. These women complain about not being able to eat whatever, whenever they want and they say that they are not able to buy things they want with the 50 TL allowance they have.

- “We live in the pension that municipality provides us. They also give us food 3 times a day. The municipality also gives us 50 TL each month. This is our only income” (D. C, 62).
- “It is good that the municipality is providing us with place to stay and food to eat but it means that we have to rely on to the same food all the time. We cannot buy the food we want. We cannot wear the clothes we want” (A.L., 64).
- “Sometimes we get zakat from the mosque and that is it” (N. İ., 54).

The inability to locate work is identified as the most significant barrier to successful adaptation of asylum seekers into society (Feeney, 2000). Somali women have employment disadvantages due to low qualification, low education level, language – cultural barriers and parental duties.

Future Aspirations: Turkey as a transit country

Most of the Somalians know that they cannot go back to Somalia and they do not want to go back either. And also, they do not want to stay in Turkey for good and they are all aiming to migrate to Europe or Canada or US. They see Turkey as a transit country. They hope that they will have a better life in these countries as these countries offer better living conditions. Some of them have families in these countries and they are hoping for a family reunion in these countries.

- “I do not want to stay here for good. I want a passport and I want to go to America or Australia.” (S. B., 28).
- “I have been living here for 8 years now. But I want to go to America or Canada”. (F.A., 49)

Double Disadvantage: Being an Asylum Seeker and Woman

The interviews showed that Somali women experience the hardships of both being a woman and being an asylum seeker.

“It is hard to be a woman. The men go and easily find a work. Women cannot.” (M, A., 38).

“We have been through a lot but we need to stay strong for children. We still need to take care for the children” (F.A., 49).

Their specific condition of women who are responsible for the children and family care is not always taken into account. But the main obstacles to female asylum seeker’s integration into the labour market is internal to family: in some cultures, women are not allowed to work (Sansone, 2016). Single asylum seeker women in particular have to face a severe challenge in trying to balance family care duties and integration into the labour market: these women may feel the need to find a job even more urgently than others because they have to support their families, but at the same time, the constraints of childcare may hamper their effort in finding a job (Freedman, 2009).

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to results of the research Somali women asylum seekers ask authorized bodies to basic needs and take some measures such as: long-term housing solutions; training and language courses. Only giving financial aids and providing temporary housing make women asylum seekers dependent on. Therefore, all the initiatives aimed at enhancing women’s skills and at facilitating their integration into society; labour inclusion measures, schooling, public transport facility, health care services and psychological support should be increased. Most of the Somali Women asylum seekers who have attended the study, desire to obtain refugee status; live and raise their children at European countries with better living conditions. That’s why they do not feel they belong to the local community.

NGOs may play a central role in fostering refugee and asylum-seeking women’s integration, especially in the present period, NGOs develop integration measures that take strongly into account the need expressed directly by refugees and asylum

seekers, and women in particular, who are the best experts on their own story and experience. Comprehensive policies have to developed both by national bodies and institutions, and by NGOs and charity organisations – have to take into account their specific needs (health, psychological support, proper housing, etc.) to properly foster their socio-economic inclusion. Integration policies should aim at their empowerment and independence and integration measures provided by public institutions and NGOs on their specific needs (Sansoneetti, 2016).

Macro-level analysis and interaction play an important role in NGO relationships with local and central government policy matters. The NGOs are working to encourage participation, to enable civic integration and educate both asylum seekers and host communities to learn about and adjust to one another constructively (Nash et al, 2016). Education, training, language courses are important in case asylum seeker educational system gives women hope and motivates them to participate in social life. They do not have much time to spend to educate themselves because of time spent for family-children care duties. Enhancing asylum seeker' s education and skills could be effective step for Social integration (Sansoneetti, 2016).

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