# Eritrean Women in Canada
## *Negotiating*

BY ATSUKO MATSUOKA AND JOHN SORENSON

Women refugees encounter all the risks and dangers that men face in flight, resettlement, and exile as well as additional threats of sexual assault and exploitation.

*Pour faire contre poids au manque d'analyses sur le genre dans les études sur les migrations forcées et à la tendance à voir l'expérience des emmes comme des ajouts, cet article examine l'interaction complexe entre les genres, les classes, les ethnies et les générations, vécue comme des expériences quotidiennes dans une communauté peu connue des immigrantes et refugiées de l'Erythrée.*

Little attention has been given to the experience of Eritrean immigrant and refugee women in Canada. This is part of a more general lack of gender analysis in studies on forced migration and a tendency to see women's issues as adds-on, thus marginalizing them (Indra 1989, 1999). A growing number of studies are bringing women's issues to the centre; however, engendering knowledge about immigrants and refugees is not a matter of studying women alone but of examining immigrant and refugee issues in terms of gendered social relations. Utilizing feminist theory, which views gender as a relational concept rather than simply equating gender with women, this article examines the complex interaction of gender, class, race, and generation as lived in the everyday experiences of Eritrean women in Canada. By addressing everyday experiences, we can observe strengths and see how past and current policies affect this diaspora population in Canada.

Our discussions are based on work conducted in five Canadian cities 98 women participated in interviews from 1990 to 1996. Most were 25 to 45 years old; 32 women had never been married, the rest of the participants either were or had been married.

### Background

Through an internationally-supervised 1993 referendum, Eritrea became Africa's newest state. Although independence was formally attained by this vote, it came after 30 years of war against Ethiopia, which claimed the former Italian colony on the Red Sea coast as its northern-most province. Most Eritreans came to Canada in the 1980s to escape the violence and repression of one of the twentieth-century's longest wars. Although culturally diverse, Eritrean society has been characterized by extreme subordination of women, a situation challenged by the main nationalist movement, the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) (Sorenson; Wilson). Seen it as the most progressive third world liberation movement and as a model for Africa, many had great hope for the EPLF as the government of the new state (Pateman).

What we identify as a diaspora group refers to expatriate minorities sharing several characteristics: dispersal from a homeland to several peripheries, collective vision of the homeland, a sense that they are not fully accepted by a host society, sense of an original homeland as the true home to which they should return, commitment to maintaining or restoring the original homeland, and sense of communal solidarity defined by their relationship with the homeland (Safran). This solidarity was reawakened in 1999 as war with Ethiopia broke out again and Eritreans in Canada joined other diaspora groups in North America and Europe to call for peace.

### Eritrean women refugees

Gender-based analysis emphasizes a need to recognize that women face special problems as refugees. Many refugees are women, often with children, who confront new demands in order to survive and support dependants. They encounter all the risks and dangers that men face in flight, resettlement, and exile as well as additional threats of sexual assault and exploitation derived from patriarchal ideologies that construct them as inferior human beings (McSpadden and Moussa; Moussa 1993). Although Eritrean women and children fled to neighbouring countries as refugees, most of those who came to Canada were sponsored by relatives. Eritrean women who came to Canada alone as refugees are limited in numbers. Gender considerations in refugee policy in Canada came into existence only in 1987 as a pilot program; it is evident that women face special problems not only coming to Canada but also after their arrival (Moussa 1998/99).

# New Lives

**Employment experiences**

Employment was a major concern for the participants interviewed. Many women who worked as janitors or parking attendants obtained their positions by word-of-mouth. Some explained these were the only kinds of jobs they could get because of their education and lack of proficiency in English. Some did not finish high school because of the war, but others had not done so because girls were not encouraged to pursue education. Most women who cleaned buildings said their social circle was limited to immediate relatives and that they felt very isolated. Often, women came to Canada under family sponsorship and did not qualify for government programs to upgrade their education or learn English; many were unaware of any available programs. Another factor that discouraged women from accessing resources and/or using services, and thus limited their social world, was a requirement to pay fees which they or their families could not afford. Even when women were employed the nature of their jobs often limited their social interaction.

These women's experiences both indicate cultural discrimination against women toward their education in Eritrea (this is more prominent among lower social and economic classes) and show how systemic discrimination against women in settlement programs affect their social relations. Sexism in Eritrea, circumscribed by class background, seems to have influenced how they could benefit during settlement in Canada. Many found "lack of Canadian working experience" to be an obstacle to gainful employment. Not all, but many women thought covert racism might be also be a factor:

> *I had some university education from Egypt before I came to Canada. I chose to study secretarial science at college. I know the woman who got the job I was interviewed for. She was in my class. She is an immigrant like me. She does not have university education and she did not have working experience either. But she got the job. I don't know for sure of course, but maybe it's because I have dark skin. When you are unemployed and [have] no money, your life becomes very limited.* (single, unemployed)

Some women were, however, successful in their profession. All of these started from the bottom and climbed up to their current positions. For example, a divorced single mother of three children in her late 30s (with some high school education from Eritrea) described in a matter-of-fact way how she started as part of the cleaning staff at a nursing home and subsequently took courses to become a health care aide, which was her current position at the time of the interview. She commented that she could not have accomplished this without having opportunities to attend tuition-free English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs as well as government support while going to a college. She acknowledged that she arrived in Canada at the right time—when government help was still available—and noted that people who arrived after her, when the government had cut funding for such support programs, were finding it very difficult to move beyond their first jobs.

Several others pointed out government support for updating education was the key to their having moved beyond entry-level positions. A woman who worked in a scientific research laboratory began her career by entering a college program which was partially supported by the government. At that time, because of government cutbacks, only a few were able to get such support.

> *I have to work very hard and show I am the one. Not everyone is so fortunate. Others who came later or learned about it later didn't even have a chance to show what they can do.*

Several women who are nurses today started from special entry programs opened to Canadians with low-income or with limited background. Some of them were nurses before they came to Canada or were teachers with university education. Some had very young children at home and had a difficult time balancing family respon-

"I know the woman who got the job I was interviewed for. She is an immigrant like me. She does not have university education. But she got the job.... Maybe it's because I have dark skin."

sibilities, paid work, and student life. However, these women were resilient and determined once some opportunities were available. Another woman's key to upward mobility was a special job opportunity which was co-sponsored by the government and a financial institution:

*I was lucky to have met this immigration officer. She read my resume and said "You will be the right person for this" and sent me to a financial institution as a trainee with a nice recommendation letter. I worked in a financial institution in Eritrea so it was just a matter of learning how things work here. I have been taking upgrading courses continuously. Many Eritreans did not get this first Canadian experience in their profession and still cannot put their feet in the door.*

Another woman who became a laboratory technician wrote an exam for promotion and got the highest score but was not promoted; instead, she heard one of her white male colleagues was going to take the position. Racism and sexism effectively block the upward mobility of many of these women. Not all the women who pursued education in Canada were successful in landing employment and, again, most were held back by what they referred to "lack of Canadian experience." However, Eritrean women are resilient, enduring, and quite adaptive to new systems. Many overcome (or survive) formidable structural oppression as long as some support is provided and opportunities made available when needed.

**Isolation and loneliness**

Virtually all exiles experienced a severing of family relationships; the diaspora is a space of disruption, where those relationships no longer function but in which their shadows continue to signify what has been lost. Life in the diaspora requires adaptation to new ideas and behaviour but not all were willing or able to make accommodations and some significant differences emerge along gendered lines. In particular, Eritrean women found men unwilling to make changes in gender relationships that women saw as necessary or beneficial. Some felt this made it impossible to create a family in Canada. One working woman, in her late 20s, married for a little over a year, commented:

*Canada is affluent but things do not provide you the richness in your life and do not give you satisfaction in life. Everyone asks us when are we having one [i. e. a child], but we are afraid of not being able to provide for them and I am afraid I need to choose my job or my kid. Without my job we cannot pay the bills. I am not so sure how helpful my husband will be. He cannot cook, he does not clean the house, and I do everything. I don't know how I can take care of a kid and work. Back home relatives or even neighbours can look after a child for me. Here, I do not know my neighbours enough. People do not care for each other so much. The relationships are very shallow.*

Social distance in Canada is much greater than in Eritrea and many of the women interviewed felt very isolated. For them, the diaspora experience meant the loss of a very rich women's network and a lack of significant social interaction. A full-time mother of two children, in her 30s, expressed her loneliness:

*When I came to Canada, I felt I left everything. You know, it is a different lifestyle. My relatives and friends lived near-by. I could leave my kids with them. I did not need to worry about them. We helped each other. You never feel lonesome. Here, I say hello to my neighbours, but they don't know me. I do not drive, so visiting my friends or relatives is not easy. I sometimes feel I am kept in this place..*

Isolation was also felt in relationships between friends. In North America, "friendship" is applied more loosely in comparison to relationships in Eritrea. Several people said they had "no friends" in Canada although we observed them to have maintained on-going social relationships on a regular basis over several years with a stable group. Women said they had Eritrean friends but when we asked if they discuss problems with them quite often the answers were ambiguous or negative. A mother, in her 30s, with a full-time paid job, alluded to the superficial nature of some of these friendships: "We chat and talk for example about kids. Some problems maybe but never real problems.... Too political, too personal." A man in his 40s explained:

*A friend is someone that you've grown up with. Here you don't know anyone with the same depth as someone from your childhood. At home, you have one friend for all reasons. Here, you divide tasks among various friends. People become more individualized here. People lie and cheat. Here you meet people from different backgrounds. It's hard to make deep friends. People don't confide in others.*

The diaspora experience does not seem to foster new friendships of the same depth as those experienced in Eritrea. This was seen as part of a general erosion of social values that many perceived as part of the diaspora experience. A woman in her late 30s comments:

*Life here is very tough. It is difficult to get a job even when you have all the qualifications. We are so busy to survive. We become too individualistic. We are losing a sense of responsibility to each other.*

A mother of two children with a part-time job said, "We are just too busy for ourselves. People do not have much time to care for others."

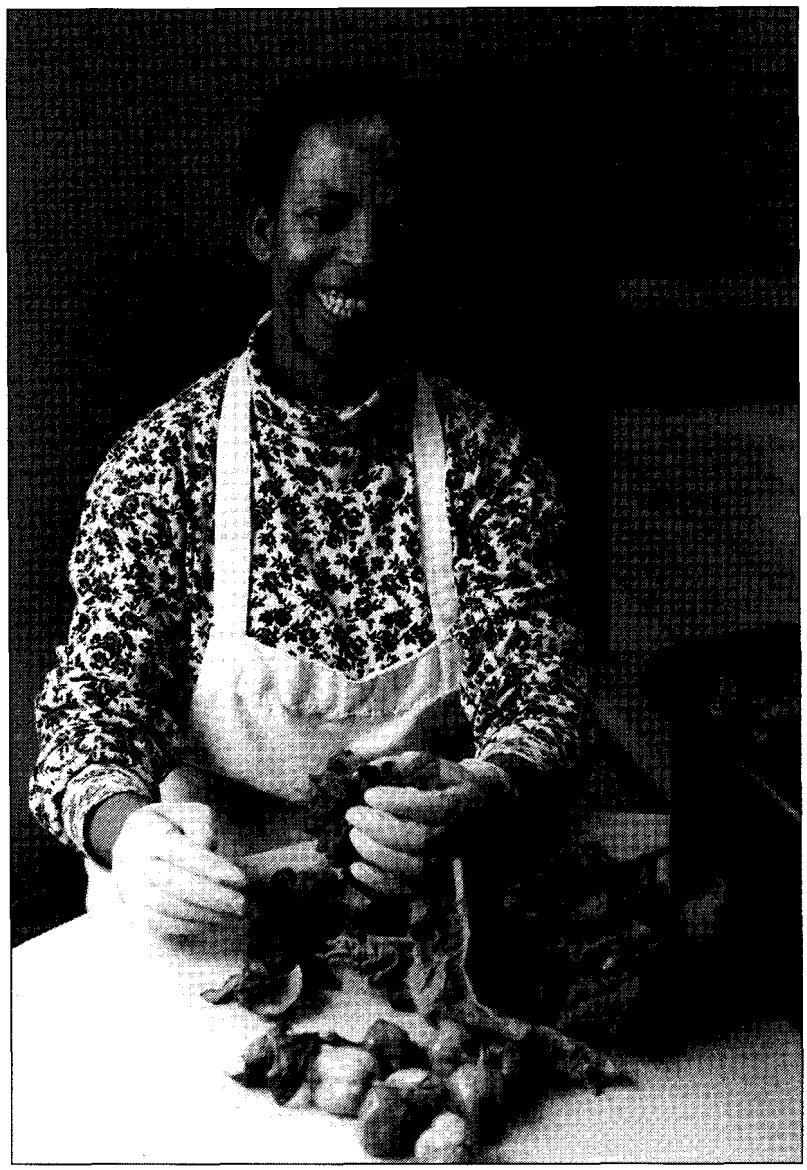
Sensing a lack of these mutual responsibilities in Canada, many experienced the diaspora as a shriveling of social life, especially those who came to Canada as adults. Structural factors of employment and income also shaped this, as participants who were on welfare expressed frustration and helplessness and indicated how lack of income limited these important social contacts. An unemployed single woman, in her late 20s, adds:

> *I have to think twice if I should spend the money for the Social [i. e. an event held to raise funds for independence and to maintain community support]. I would like to contribute toward my country and my family, but if I attend the Social I cannot.*

### Changes in gender relations across generations

The diaspora experience contributed to changes in gender relations across generations. Girls and young women who have spent most or all of their lives in Canada have different frames of reference and expectations from those raised in Eritrea. Adapting to life in Canada meant that women raised in Eritrea were forced to change their expectations. Many of the participants felt that life in Canada did offer more possibilities to girls in terms of education and employment.

While the diaspora presented new possibilities for some women, it also challenged traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. While some women found themselves in new "breadwinner" roles, some men worried about a loss of status associated with unemployment or underemployment (McSpadden and Moussa). Many in the diaspora are well-educated but because their professional qualifications (for example, engineering, accounting, teaching, nursing, and medical degrees) are not recognized, they need to go back to university but cannot afford to do so. Consequently, many qualified professionals are underemployed or simply cannot find work. Like the emphasis on "Canadian work experience," the insistence that only a degree from a developed country counts for an entry into a professional field is a continuation of colonialist superiority. Judith Goode and Jo Anne Schneider examined ethnic and racial relations in Philadelphia and found much confusion and contradictions in expectations for immigrants and for society. They argue that this partly stems from a colonialist "good immigrant" model: immigrants should struggle before succeeding in North America. Discussing the experiences of professionals amongst the diaspora population, it is evident that this "good immigrant" model is alive and well in Canada and continues to present barriers to newcomers. As society becomes more multicultural and multiracial, this imperialistic approach to other countries' professional degrees and unfair practices of demanding Canadian work experience make very little sense in terms of growth in non-traditional areas. It only makes sense for maintaining the status quo.



*Meaza Afewerki (from Eritrea). Women, Food and Storytelling Eco-Art Exhibit. Photo: Anuja Mendiratta ©1998.*

These obstacles to employment directly affect relationships within the family and in the community. Some saw unemployment weakening the image and authority of parents:

> *Many people are on welfare here.*

*It's not a good role model for kids to have their parents sitting around watching TV and just collecting welfare.*

Others criticized parents for failing to provide proper role models and leadership. A young woman who had just began university succinctly described the impact:

*We really need good role models for Eritrean youth in Canada. Most fathers and others work as taxi drivers. They work hours and hours and are still not making it. Women are working as housekeepers in hotels or janitors in office buildings, parking attendants. Long hours but very little pay. Very few made it as professionals and became successful here in Canada. When I went to the States, things were very different. Much bigger community and more opportunities. There are many scientists, some work for NASA, lawyers, doctors, professors, successful business men and women. Some are millionaires! What a difference! I saw more possibilities there. Seeing these people in the States gave me hope and I regained respect for the Eritreans and our culture.*

In turn, parents worried about children losing their culture and feared dangerous incursions from North American society in the form of alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity. However, one young university student echoed the views of other young Eritreans when she stated:

*Parents think we don't behave like respectful Eritreans. Just because we dress like other teenage Canadians they worry that we are secretly dating or doping. Personally, I do not agree with the traditional marriage.... Men and women should be more equal. I respect Eritrean culture but I won't have a relationship like my parents have.*

Not all parents insisted on tradition. A single mother shared her aspirations to establish a nontraditional relationship with her two daughters: "I am their parent but I want to be their friend as well. And I encourage them to be whatever they want to be [regardless of gender]." A mother of teen-agers noted the "cross-cultural" character of diaspora households:

*The kids have to deal with a lot in North America from peer pressure to racism. They are not really Eritrean. I have to keep reminding myself and my husband they are Canadians, so we need to relate to them differently from as we might have brought them up in Eritrea.*

Anxiety about youth relates to changing structures of family authority. Eritrea, like other societies in the region, is patriarchal, with a rigid hierarchy of authority and power; this form of power at the state level has its miniaturized mirror image in the household strictly controlled by the father. Some parents perceived the diaspora experience—cultural displacement, unemployment, loss of status—as a threat to their authority as parents and, for men, their authority as husbands. A mother of two in her 30s explains:

*In Eritrea we do not say you have to listen to parents. The young respect the old. Teaching kids what is right and wrong was not the responsibility of parents only. Everyone took a share. Families, neighbours, teachers, everyone and we all said the same thing to kids. But not here. Kids learn all sorts of things from school and from TV.*

Some mothers wondered how to discipline children in Canada. In Eritrea, the family is the foundation of social support but in Canada some single mothers had to raise their families in a strange environment, without assistance of relatives, and faced the unaccustomed role of head of the family. Often, lack of English-language fluency played a role. Parents who were not fluent in English were placed at a disadvantage in dealing with Canadian institutions. Forced to rely on their children, they worried about loss of authority and respect. This was accompanied by anxiety about Canadian laws and possible intervention by the state:

*It is a well-known story in our community. These parents don't speak English well and they don't understand the Canadian system. So the kids manipulated them. If the parents tried to tell them what to do, they said they would call 911 and the police would take them. So the kids do whatever they want.*

Even when both parents are present, women found that in Canada parents are isolated and pressured by double demands of employment and childrearing. This is in part due to the impact of neo-conservative politics —massive downloading of social responsibilities on Canadian families (Luxton). Not only must parents operate with severely reduced support networks but they do so in a context in which the entire constellation of attitudes and practices associated with childrearing has been altered.

The experience of Eritrean diaspora parents indicates the need for providing accurate information to parents who may have limited English and limited understanding of the education and child protection systems in Canada. Many immigrants are so busy trying to survive and are so socially isolated, that it is important to ensure access to information in their own language. It is also important to come up with innovative ways to disseminate such information. Furthermore, a critical review of the effects of neo-conservative policies on immigrant families would prove beneficial.

The experiences of immigrant and refugee women from Eritrea are shaped by the patriarchal character of traditional Eritrean society but also by sexism, racism, class issues, and generational problems the face in Canada. Policies related to immigrant

and refugee must address the systemic oppressions they encounter in their daily lives.

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## JERI KROLL

### What It Means After 80 Years

What do you think of
when you can't think?
What memories taunt
when you can't remember?

You recognize each physical ache
in that well-thumbed body.
Nerves almost welcome the pulse
like phone calls from friends.

Dependable pain swells the air.
You hear the thunder,
know what comes after.

But the past is a shooting star.
Is that an afterglow out in space
or did that planetary mist
always cloud the dome?

Better to stay home where the mind's propped up.
A photo, a lamp, a glass figurine—
flint against which you can light.
For minutes, the truth of a life gleams.

Relaxing as a holiday, this physical world.
You remember you should know
what it means.

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