African Women Refugee Resettlement: A Womanist Analysis

Badiah Haffejee¹ and Jean F. East¹

Abstract
In considering forced migration as a consequence of global conflict, women with refugee status are especially vulnerable. The influx of refugees into the United States, in this case, refugees from Africa, requires us to examine various aspects of what it means to be a refugee. Drawing upon current and extant literature, this article investigates the challenges faced by women refugees from Africa. A womanist framework is described and applied to four areas of resettlement experience including gendered expectations, trauma and mental health, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural integration. In addition, the policy assumptions of the Refugee Act of 1980 are contrasted with the realities and experiences of women refugees from Africa. Implications for social work practice, policy advocacy, and research are discussed.

Keywords
African women refugees, refugee policy, resettlement, womanist perspective

Introduction
In an increasingly unstable world, sizable numbers (15.4 million) of refugees are unable to be repatriated to their home countries but instead resettle in developed nations (U.S. Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration [PRM], 2015a). These individuals and families are forced to migrate due to war, armed conflict, political instability, ethnic and civil unrest, and persecution. In 2012, refugee women and girls accounted for more than half of the refugee population, a proportion that continues to grow (United Nations Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2014). This trend is referred to as the feminization of migration (Ross-Sheriff, 2011). The availability of gender disaggregated data by country of origin is limited (D. C. Martin & Yankay, 2012); however, in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, a total of 69,926 refugees were resettled in the United States. Of these, 15,988 (23%) refugees were from various parts of the African continent. In FY 2014, a total of 69,987 refugees were admitted of which 17,476 (25%) were from Africa (PRM, 2015b). We also know that significant numbers of Somalis, Congolese, and Eritreans and smaller numbers of Sudanese, Burundians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, and

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Tunisians will continue to be admitted to the United States (PRM, 2015a) and those women will con-
tinue to be among those resettled.

This article uses a feminist/womanist lens to examine the experiences and challenges women ref-
ugees from Africa face in the context of refugee policy and U.S. social and economic structures,
including social work practices. A womanist perspective places the experiences of women refugees
from Africa in the center of the analysis. That said, we recognize that the experience of each woman
is unique and that refugees from different countries have different experiences. The experiences
reported in this article are based on the current research and extant literature, which report some
common experiences including poverty, war, trauma, family and children, limited literacy, refugee
camp experiences, and barriers in the resettlement process.

**Positionality of Authors**

The first author’s interest in this work developed primarily through personal experiences as a woman
of color growing up in apartheid South Africa and experiencing U.S. society as an “outsider” (as a
non-U.S. citizen and Muslim) for more than a decade. These experiences influenced my perception
of the struggles of African women refugees. It also inspired a passion and commitment not only to
bring forward the voices of African women refugees but also to actively engage in the dismantling
of various sites of oppression that continue to define African women refugees’ realities, especially in
the United States. The second author is a white feminist scholar, who supervised a resettlement pro-
gram and has always questioned the confines of the policy mandates.

**Womanism**

Womanism is a theoretical perspective that originated in feminist theory (Abrahams, 2001) and is
defined as a form of consciousness that incorporates intersections of race, economics, culture, pol-
itics, and nationalism (Hill Collins, 1991; Phillips, 2006). It is a framework that emerged through
increased awareness of a more complex network of institutional inequities experienced by women
in different racial/ethnic communities. Special attention is given to the different ways in which
women of color experience racial and class inequalities within social structures relative to white
women in the United States (Gillman, 2010). Womanism was first coined by celebrated author, poet,
and social activist Alice Walker (1983) and illuminates women as having voice, questioning, and
being activists within the community, guided by a vision of equality and inclusiveness (as cited
in Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). The womanist perspective has been further developed by scholars
to explain the historical, cultural, and political positionality of women of African descent in America
(Hill Collins, 1991). Central to this perspective is the exploration of identity formation (i.e., histories
and cultures) that is commemorative of the struggles of African women as well as their achievements

Within womanist scholarship, a number of distinct principles are considered “best traditions”
ing tenets: (1) it is antioppressive, is constantly engaged in the work of dismantling and fighting all
sites of oppressive social structures that restrict and circumscribe the agency of black/African
women; (2) it is communitarian and views commonweal or the state of collective well-being as the
goal of social change; (3) it is nonideological, that is, womanists abhor rigid lines of demarcation and
are inclined to function in a decentralized manner; (4) it is vernacular, engaging in everyday experi-
ences and language to define those experiences; and (5) it is spiritualized, honoring the spiritual
practices and beliefs of all (pp. xxiv–xxvi).

Women refugees from Africa occupy a position at a neglected juncture of many categories of dif-
ference, such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, and country of birth (Tomlinson, 2010) and therefore
are pushed to the fringe of U.S. society. Womanism is one vehicle with which women refugees from Africa can acknowledge, give back, and revere their womanhood (Gillman, 2010; Modupe Kolawole, 1997). For women refugees from Africa, self-definition focuses on positive collectivity as opposed to individuality and her strength comes from within, “her culture forms the foundation for a wholesome appreciation” (Modupe Kolawole, 1997, p. 193). Additionally, womanism is a resource that helps women refugees from Africa “negotiate life in a white racist society” (Douglas & Sanders, 1995, p. 9). A womanist analysis begins with the idea that African social institutions, namely, the extended family system and culture, including linguistic patterns, cognitive systems, and ritual governing behaviors and social exchanges, were not lost during colonization, imperialism, racial domination, and now forced migration (Gillman, 2010). Rather, these cultural norms and practices are ingrained in the social identities of the women refugees. Womanism also provides a necessary framework to better understand the invisibility perceived and experienced by women refugees from Africa and lends insight into both the reception and the integration (Mosselson, 2009) of African women refugees into U.S. society.

Refugee Policy

In her poem “The New Colossus,” Emma Lazarus (1883) wrote:

Give me your tired, your poor,/your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/the wretched refuse of your teeming shore./Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me./I lift my lamp beside the golden door

(lines, 10-14).

These words have become an American credo and a governing U.S. attitude toward immigrants/refugees (Roberts, 1982). However, despite the high principles embodied by these words, refugee policy and its sociopolitical values have made integration difficult for women refugees from Africa who bring with them unique life circumstances that make economic, social, and cultural integration a complex experience (Newland, Tanaka, & Barker, 2007).

Two of the key objectives of the Refugee Act of 1980 are stated as containing (a) a permanent program for the regular admission of refugees on an ongoing annual basis and (b) the provision for the effective resettlement of newcomers. A refugee is defined as any person who has been forced to flee his or her country because of war, violence, or persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (Kennedy, 1981; Roberts, 1982).

Under the Act, resettlement assistance is provided to states and local communities, often through nonprofit organizations. Specifically, provisions include (1) employment training and job placement as quickly as possible to achieve financial independence, (2) social service funds for English training (in nonwork hours where possible) and case-management services, (3) cash assistance in a manner that will not discourage economic self-sufficiency, (4) participation in any available and appropriate social service program providing language or job training, and (5) suspension of cash assistance if the refugee refuses either to participate in a social service program or an appropriate employment offer (Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR], 2012).

Embedded in the Refugee Act of 1980 is a philosophy that increasingly views full and meaningful integration for all resettled refugees from the perspective of economic independence or competence (Halpern, 2008; Newland et al., 2007). This conceptualization of resettlement as economic self-sufficiency is ubiquitous in the policy, even though the time frame and the role of financial independence for refugees have been controversial (Dwyer, 2010). Ott (2011) aptly noted that “economic self-sufficiency is the first point mentioned in the Act and its reauthorization in 2002, and the idea of self-sufficiency is reiterated eleven more times in the legislation” (p. 10).
This economic independence is to occur rather quickly. Over the years, due to limited funding, the reimbursement or eligibility period has been reduced from 36 months in 1988 to 8 months, where it is today (ORR, 2012). While supportive programs may be continued, the assumption in these time reductions is that after 8 months, a refugee would be able to earn enough to support themselves or they must qualify for income assistance under the provisions of temporary assistance to needy families. In summary, refugee policy is humanitarian in intent and yet is normed to American cultural standards and welfare policies that abhor dependency and promote self-sufficiency in economic terms (East, 1998).

Lived Experiences of Women Refugees From Africa

The experiences of women refugees worldwide is a subject of concern for the United Nations, humanitarian organizations, and local and national refugee programs in the United States and other Westernized countries (UNHCR, 2015). In Africa, the violence and wars that have erupted since the 1990s have resulted in a new understanding of the challenges faced by women refugees from multiple African countries (Bermudez Torres, 2007).

For many women refugees, including those from Africa, there are four areas where lived experiences and U.S. refugee policy and practice intersect. These experiences include (1) gendered experiences as woman refugees, (2) trauma and mental health, (3) economic self-sufficiency and employment expectations, and (4) cultural integration. Each of these experiences will be further described using the available literature and research. Common experiences for women refugees from many countries will be described first, followed by specific examples from studies on women refugees from Africa.

Gendered Experiences in the Resettlement Process

Women refugees around the world are displaced as a result of war and internal country conflicts. They relocate in their natal countries and/or escape to refugee camps in neighboring countries to seek safety (UNHCR, 2014). This process is particularly challenging for women who often have responsibility for children and elders (Schafer, 2002). While refugee camps are considered the best solution for refugees, gender inequality in camps is extremely pervasive (S. F. Martin, 2004). Often food and other basic necessities are distributed to male heads of household, leaving women, especially female-headed households, disenfranchised (Bermudez Torres, 2007). In most refugee camps, education, vocational training, and self-supporting opportunities (Bermudez Torres, 2007) for women are extremely limited. Finding work or any other means of economic survival is also challenging for women refugees. In the event that women do find work, in or outside the camp, it is often marginal economic activities and badly remunerated (S. F. Martin, 2004).

Thousands of women refugees from Africa have been displaced due to the violence and wars in many African countries. While some wars have subsided and repatriation is occurring, such as in the Congo, others have escalated, for example, to Central African Republic and South Sudan (UNHCR, 2015). The hardships for women refugees from Africa begin in the fleeing process. For example, in Rwanda in the 1990s, women often had to split from adult males, so the entire family would not be killed (Schafer, 2002). African women with families needed to provide for family members on their own.

Sexual violence against women refugees from Africa is significant, first in the natal countries and then in the displacement and refugee camp experience. For example, the UNHCR (2002) reported that the majority of women survivors of the Rwandan genocide were sexually assaulted by Rwandan soldiers (as cited in Bermudez Torres, 2007). In the same report, thousands of displaced women from Liberia and Sierra Leone were sexually and physically violated by police, soldiers, and civilians.
(Bermudez Torres, 2007). In particular, African women from minority ethnic clans/tribes such as Somali Bantus and Ogadenis are often most vulnerable, subjected to sexual and other gender-based violence in refugee camps, sometimes by other Somalis, Kenyan police, camp officials, aid workers, or security employees (Bermudez Torres, 2007). Schafer (2002) tells a poignant story of a woman from Somalia who first was raped by Somali warlords. She escaped with her daughter and was sent to a refugee camp where she was gang raped, brutalized, and became pregnant. She had a baby boy and cared for him. A social worker and refugee herself from Somalia described camps as “nightmarish places.” . . . “For a mother, a night in a refugee camp also means no sleep. She has to fight to survive the night, protecting herself and her children from wild animals and human brutality” (Bokore, 2013, p. 98).

**Trauma and Mental Health**

The historical traumatic experiences of war, torture, forced separation from family, loss, gender-based violence, and exposure to rape make women refugees extremely vulnerable to long-term psychosocial and physiological problems, leading to mental health diagnoses (Bhui et al., 2006). Although more research is needed, we know that women refugees have disproportionately higher rates of isolation, depression, anxiety, and symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Halco´n, Robertson, & Monsen, 2010; Ross-Sheriff, 2011). Craig, Mac Jajua, and Warfa (2009) reported that traumatic events such as war and armed conflict in country of origin are established risk factors for long-term mental health problems, and the risk increases with the severity of traumatic (e.g., torture) exposure. A recent study conducted in the United States showed that rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression range from 25% to 50% among refugee youths, with significantly higher rates for women refugees (Wilson, Mutaza, & Shakya, 2010).

Posttrauma and current mental health problems can make it extremely difficult to look for employment and access mental health services. This then increases levels of stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and feelings of isolation (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). Seeking appropriate mental health services and sharing their stories is difficult. For example, in Somali culture, “there is no cultural context to deal with the trauma of sexual violence” due to the custom of *hisaut*, prohibiting discussion of sexual matters (Bokore, 2013, p. 99). In group counseling, Somali women often talk in the third person about themselves (Bokore, 2013).

**Economic Self-Sufficiency and Employment Expectations**

Economic self-sufficiency is an ideal that is embedded in social welfare policy (Ott, 2011). Refugee policy strongly supports economic self-sufficiency and refugees are expected to gain human capital and language skills and earn enough money to not need income assistance. Specifically, policy mandates that women refugees enter the workforce within 90 days after their arrival (Sossou, Craig, Ogren, & Schnak, 2008).

For many women refugees, including those from Africa, economic self-sufficiency in the United States is a challenge. A significant proportion of refugees arrive in their new societies with little to no material possessions or financial resources (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). In their natal countries, many women experienced restricted access to resources, job skills, and formal education and were only allowed minimal participation in policy and decision making (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2013). Consequently, resettlement agencies focus their efforts on locating employment first for the most employable individual per household, generally the male in the household if there is one (Halpern, 2008; Kramer, 2011).

Financial independence is closely tied to literacy, English proficiency, and education (Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Women refugees frequently mention their less developed English as one of the
most significant barriers to integration in the host community (Fong, Busch, Armour, Heffron, & Chanmugam, 2008; Newland et al., 2007). The lack of English makes it difficult to negotiate with prospective employers, advocate in the workplace, develop cross cultural social networks, and communicate with helping professionals (Twagiramungu, 2013).

Over the years, women refugees from Africa have not fared well in employment. In 2007, 13.6% females were unemployed compared to only 5.9% males who were unemployed (Newland et al., 2007). Women refugees from Africa are often not English proficient and have less formal education than do their male counterparts (Twagiramungu, 2013). As African countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, native languages were incorporated. For example, in Sudan, after the British left, Arabic was introduced as the official language. In one study, a Sudanese woman reported “it was very hard for the English language to be officially taught” at home and in refugee camps women talked about years in camps with limited access to education (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010, p. 155).

African gendered-based cultural norms can also have an impact on employment possibilities. The role of women in some African societies is caretaking of children and the home. As an example, in one study, a Dinka woman from Sudan stated, “It is a shame for a Dinka woman if her husband has to do the cleaning or cooking. We don’t do this” (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010, p. 157).

Cultural Integration as a Lived Experience

Cultural integration includes how refugees adapt to the norms, values, and customs of the host country. Throughout history, the prejudices and stereotypes of the host community, in this case, the United States, have shaped the cultural context in which refugees have had to adapt (Shepard, 2008). One challenge for many women refugees is the shift from developing countries to industrialized countries and new systems of social and economic services. Women refugees may lack an understanding of how U.S. systems operate, such as child care or health care, making them hesitant to use these resources (Fong et al., 2008). Changes in family and community structures adversely affect women refugees, as they carry out caregiving and domestic activities (S. F. Martin, 2004).

Given the situations in Africa that have resulted in increased numbers of women refugees and the trauma they have endured, women refugees from Africa face difficult cultural integration challenges. One example is that many women refugees from Africa are Muslim, and their faith is one that mainstream America equates with terrorism (Wingfield & Karaman, 2001). Although Muslim women refugees wear the hijab (head scarf) and traditional clothing, this stigmatized part of their identity is conspicuous and can bring rejection and discrimination. “Safiya, a Somali, explained that her veil was always an issue and that she has been told on several occasions at work to use smaller veils so her long veil does not interfere with her job security” (Jatau, 2011, p. 214). In addition, the images portrayed in the media are often of women refugees massed in refugee camps in Africa, living in makeshift shelters without drinking water, sufficient food supplies, or basic washing facilities. These images of “extreme insecurity are often revealed to provoke pity in the spectator” (Freedman, 2007, p. 1). These images also present us with an interesting duality, invoking fear to perhaps gain public approval for foreign military intervention, or invoking pity, to support humanitarian actions. Such media images can become a site of oppression as Collins (2002) points out, especially when evoking either/or dualities (as cited in Howard-Hamilton, 2003), such as pity and fear.

A second cultural challenge surfaces in the presence of collectivist versus individualistic worldviews. The majority of African cultures can be described as collectivist or communal, rather than individualistic, and rely on the family and community as the main source of physical, emotional, and mental support (S. F. Martin, 2004). The loss of a familiar culture is cited as the most difficult of all the other resettlement issues that face women refugees from Africa in their new environment (Harris & Maxwell, 2000). In their study of Eritrean refugees, Krehbiel and Cochetel (2013) assert that social connections, that is, the abundance versus the lack of safe and supportive social networks,
can be the difference between a path toward some self-reliance and recovery versus “despair and isolation leading to deprivation” (p. 28).

**Womanism and the Social Work Response**

Womanism, an anti-oppressive practice, is a form of consciousness that increases awareness of the oppression of women of African descent. It was developed to center the experiences of American women of African descent and provide Africana women a way to name and define themselves apart from white dominated feminism. Expanding on this perspective, womanism can also assist in better understanding and responding to the complexity of the experiences that form the social identities of women refugees from Africa who now live in the United States. Womanism also exposes the effects of sexist and racist oppression, when the oppression of refugee status in the United States is a part of one’s identity. Social work is on the forefront of implementing refugee services and policy in this country. We work with women refugees in many settings including public social services, refugee resettlement programs, mental health centers, community-based housing, and job training programs. By adopting a womanist perspective to analyze the experiences of women refugees from Africa, social workers can contribute to anti-oppressive social work practice, policy, and research.

A womanist perspective on the gendered experiences of women refugees from Africa begins by exposing these experiences. Womanism supports the vernacular of everyday life. Narratives and stories such as those documented in the articles by Schafer (2002) and Bokore (2013) help us to fully understand the level of sexual violence and trauma that women refugees from war torn countries in Africa have experienced. These stories need to be documented and told, not as isolated events but as systemic shared experiences of women from African countries seeking safety and asylum. For social workers who provide direct services to women refugees from Africa, it is important to provide space for telling stories, recognizing that depending on specific cultural norms, some stories cannot be told or acknowledged out loud. In mental health practice, where trauma symptoms are generally enumerated by diagnoses (i.e., PTSD), the meaning of trauma experiences and the symptoms experienced by women refugees from Africa need to be honored. If their stories are centered in the resettlement process, the strengths and resiliencies of African women can also be better acknowledged. African-centered womanism exalts “struggle, creativity and resourcefulness from which we can extract models of achievement and possibility” (Karenga & Tembo, 2012, p. 33).

Womanism also acclaims that women are connected to their histories. Particularly, salient in the origins of womanism is honoring the history of the African people and African culture, including the precolonial experience when African women were leaders and rulers (Nnaemeka, 1998). The presence of women refugees from Africa in the United States provides an opportunity for womanists to examine common historical experiences of racial, classist, and sexist oppressions for all women of African descent in the United States and around the world. In addition, mutual experiences and commonalities that demonstrate resilience for both African American women and women refugees from Africa need to be recognized and honored as sites of resistance.

A womanist perspective also honors the African social institutions of family and community, including the important role of both men and women in society (Tsuruta, 2012). Cultural integration for women refugees from Africa needs to promote identity development that supports collectivist and spiritualized beliefs and cultural practices (Modupe Kolawole, 1997). In this context, accepting African gender roles is important to the integration process. For women refugees from Africa, making a “homeplace” of cultural safety for one’s family is essential and an act of resistance (Hooks, 1990). Social workers can support the formation of women’s self-help groups, family and mutual assistance associations, or women-initiated enterprises that promote collectivity and community, allowing for the participation of women refugees in the lives of their new communities.
U.S. refugee policy is a significant location for womanist critique. Specifically, the Refugee Act of 1980 frames the experience of women refugees from Africa. A womanist critique of the policy goal of economic self-sufficiency exposes how the lived experiences of women refugees from Africa are in stark contrast to the demands of refugee policy. Economic self-sufficiency mandates consider refugees as a whole and ignore the historical, cultural, and political oppression of African countries since the 1990s. This is particularly true for women refugees from Somalia, Burundi, Rwanda, the Congo, Sudan, and Somalia, where political unrest and violence have caused complex refugee situations (Schafer, 2002).

A key question from a womanist perspective is how can social work advocate for policy mandates that better accommodate the lived experience of many women refugees from Africa? First, if the policy emphasis is on economic stability, accessible language-acquisition opportunities should be made available to women refugees at various times and in multiple, easily accessible, locations. At the same time, women refugees must have the same opportunity as refugee men to participate in all funded services including employment services. Woman refugees from Africa might also benefit from social policies that allow for easier and longer term access to public assistance, which will afford them additional time for building skill sets in English, job skills training, professional certification, and education. In implementing refugee policy, when the lived experiences of war and gender-based violence are acknowledged, women need to be given options for trauma-based services and case management, before expectations of securing employment are imposed. Provisions for culturally appropriate mental health services are a priority.

In addition, since employment mandates will likely not change, employment options that honor the traditions, cultural expectations, and spiritual practices of women from Africa need to be considered. A strength of womanism is that it honors and acknowledges the African way of life. Women refugees from Africa do bring a set of skills such as farming and hand-making abilities, but these do not fit well with the U.S. labor market (The Lewin Group, 2013). Examples of opportunities for women refugees from Africa might include women’s urban farming, child care cooperatives, or selling handmade products. The strengths and skills of women refugees from Africa need to be supported as potential economic assets and promoted as employment opportunities (Newland et al., 2007). Social workers can educate both policy makers and service providers on the experiences, needs, and strengths/assets of women refugees from Africa.

When women refugees from Africa, as with many women refugees from other countries, do find employment, they often face a labor market that is racialized and gendered, maintaining segregation and inequality in job opportunities (Itto, 2008). For example, in a mixed methods study by Itto, Sudanese respondents pointed out that “refugees [including women] are often oriented towards menial jobs by resettlement agencies from the beginning . . . simply to get them out of a caseload” (pp. 85–86). Many employers are also reluctant to hire women refugees from Africa for a variety of reasons, which may include race, gender, class, nontransferability of skills, and refugee status (Itto, 2008). This increases discrimination in selection procedures on gender or racial grounds albeit overtly or covertly (Newland et al., 2007).

Continued research on women refugees from Africa is important. Social workers can support participatory research with women refugees from Africa to further develop women centered and womanist models that acknowledge African women refugees’ commonalities and heterogeneity. For example, it is imperative that the voices of women refugees are in narratives that link traumatic experiences to participation in family based services. In this context, the development of feminist/womanist interpretive methods that solidify the voices of women refugees from Africa can serve as an antidote to “past subjugation of knowledge and experience” (Jager & Carolan, 2008, p. 301). These methods offer a forum for women’s experiences to emerge without succumbing to imposed categories or power imbalances.
Finally, womanism is grounded in an understanding of how the experiences of women refugees from Africa are embedded in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial experiences. Notably, the subordination of women in Africa during colonial imperialism has continued during the postcolonial unrest as wars, dictatorships, and cultural practices continue to oppress women (Aina, 1998). As womanism evolves, and as social work increases its presence in international work, there is much to be gained from a global social justice agenda that integrates women refugees from Africa into the fight for basic human rights for all women of African descent (Hill Collins, 2013). As the international feminist organization, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era stated, “We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent in every country, and from the relationships between countries” (Miles, 1998, p. 179).

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