"If You Leave Your Country You Have No Life!" Rape, Suicide, and Violence: The Voices of Ethiopian, Somali, and Sudanese Female Refugees in Kenyan Refugee Camps

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On the first day that I arrived in Kakuma Refugee Camp to conduct my field research, the camp authorities had a dilemma. A Dinka Sudanese woman had hung herself. But no one wanted to touch the dead body. The Kenyan personnel vehemently refused, particularly the women, claiming, “in our culture we cannot touch dead bodies!”

In war zones, militarism intensifies women’s subordination and violence against females escalates. It is often assumed that once women have fled the conflict zones of their homelands to “safe havens” in a neighboring country, security will prevail. Insecurity and violence, however, often intensify. In foreign refugee camps changes take place in the core relationships between women and men, and the legal and societal rules and laws that prevail in the home country break down. Thus, refugee women are often further victimized once they flee into foreign lands.

Women’s voices concerning the violent episodes in refugee camps are often muted and left unheard. Aid personnel and camp authorities are often overwhelmed with merely providing the basic necessities of life; they have little time to listen. Further, male refugees are often the rep-
resentatives and go-betweens for their own communities to the official authorities and United Nations personnel. Thus, many of the women in refugee camps in recent times have come to live in fear and isolation.\textsuperscript{3} This paper presents the voices of women from three conflict zones—Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan—living in Kenyan refugee camps.

\textit{The Most Troubled Part of Africa}

The Horn is perhaps Africa’s most troubled region. Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia have been conflict zones for many years and the refugee situation in this part of Africa has developed into one of the world’s largest, most intractable, and most complex human tragedies.\textsuperscript{4} Every woman who has escaped with her life from one of these warring countries has had a unique experience.

\textbf{Brief Overview of the Conflict in Ethiopia}

Historically, Ethiopia has only been a nation-state for a few years. In 1974 Mengistu Haile Mariam overthrew the world’s last empire under Haile Selassie. A major factor triggering the coup was the government’s inaction from 1972 to 1974 when famine swept across the northern provinces, claiming 200,000 lives. The overthrow of the old order was welcomed by most Ethiopians. Unfortunately, what began as a promising revolutionary transformation quickly degenerated into a repressive dictatorship that pushed the nation into chronic instability and distress. By the end of 1974, after the first in a series of bloody purges within its ranks, the Derg had embraced Marxism as its guiding philosophy. By 1977 the Derg itself had been transformed from a collective decision-making body to a small clique loyal to Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, who became a presidential dictator. From 1974 to 1991 Ethiopians suffered through civil war. In the face of oppressive central authority, ethnic-based resistance movements became increasingly effective in their struggles throughout much of the country. Having seized the lands of the old ruling classes, the Mengistu regime, in accordance with its Marxist-Leninist precepts, invested most of its agricultural inputs in large state farms, whose productivity was abysmal. In 1991, after years of struggle,
Meles Zenawi overthrew Mengistu Haile Mariam’s Marxist-oriented military dictatorship. Ethiopians have paid a terrible price for their nation’s conflicts, particularly the women.

**Flight out of Ethiopia**

Misrak, a Gurage, came from a small village, Yerer, north of Addis Ababa in Shewa province. She grew up with other Gurage, Oromo, and Amhara peoples. The few years before the 1974 revolution and the years following it were radically different, and Misrak’s account lends a view of village life under the late Haile Selassie and early Mengistu regimes:

We were seven in the family. My primary school was run by the government. It was a mixed school of Amharic speakers. There was no religious instruction. . . . I was born in 1969. . . . Before Mengistu everything was cheap: food, clothes, even people with no education could get a job. With Mengistu everything changed with his socialism. He nationalized everything. In 1974 young men were drafted into the army. My father was a farmer and my mother worked in the house. In 1974 all our land was confiscated. They left us our house. But my father was renting houses in the town and they confiscated them. We stayed in the house in the countryside. They made our farm into a cooperative, but then the land lay there unfarmed; it stayed like that for two years. They kept telling us, “You’re from a feudal society and we will change this!” You could be jailed if you farmed the land. The whole community was in the same position. They left us with our vegetable garden. We had cattle and started a small food shop for survival. The curriculum in our school did not stay the same. In the missionary school there had been American education. Now it became Soviet education. Now it was “Socialism” and “Communism” classes and women had to study it. In the countryside few women were educated. Of the 1,700 students [in the school], only 100 were women. Schools were also far from the villages. I did go to school; I was made to go because my father saw an advantage in learning. But I did not do well in my Communism class. Political education was new to us. . . . I left in 1984/85. I was
age 16. My two brothers were drafted into Mengistu’s army and taken to Eritrea and I left my village.

At this point, Misrak fell silent, looked extremely disturbed, and suddenly refused to talk. Even at the urging of her two brothers, who stated “Misrak, you have an important story to tell,” she became dumbfounded and fearful. Apparently, upon leaving her village she underwent a harrowing experience that she now found impossible to recount.

Interestingly, however, the oral history of another Ethiopian woman counters that of Misrak above, for according to some women the coming of Mengistu Haile Mariam’s regime was a liberating experience. Today, Yeshi is 48 years old, drinks alcohol, smokes, has a smoker’s cough, and wears very low cut dresses. According to male Ethiopian informants at Kakuma refugee camp, most people consider Yeshi the neighborhood prostitute. Yet Yeshi’s life began much like that of many other Ethiopian women. An Amharic woman, she was born during the Haile Selassie period in 1948 in a village named Gendibu in Warilu district of Wollo Province. Yeshi agreed with Misrak that these years were good. Her father was a farmer and a priest and grew wheat, teff, maize, barley, and sorghum, all of which sold well in the local market. As a child Yeshi assisted with the farm. At nine years of age she was married and went to live in her husband’s house. She did not have sex until she was 11 years old, and her dowry was “approximately five to ten cows.” According to Yeshi, “in this culture you only have one wife”; her parents negotiated the marriage. Her husband was 17 years old. Although Yeshi claims her in-laws treated her well, she was divorced five years later and then quickly forced to leave her neighborhood:

My first child came at 14 years. Then I got divorced. I only had one child. I left and went to Addis and left my child with my own mother. . . . Once you divorce it is not customary to have another husband in that area so I left to be in the city.

Yeshi did not explain why she was suddenly divorced, but Ethiopian society is monogamous, and from a feminist perspective it is possible
that her husband fell in love with another woman. Another possibility exists, according to Yilma Tafere, a male associate of Yeshi:

Many women take “boyfriends” when they are married as their husbands often take trips far away. They meet men at the river or when they are collecting firewood. Many married couples frequently live separately from the main family in their own cottage. In this environment many women fall in love with other men. People have hidden lives. Her [Yeshi’s] boyfriend may have been a married man while the man she married may be old. . . . This happens a lot. It would also be likely that her husband would beat her and divorce her upon finding out about her secret affair.

Thus, whatever the circumstances may have been, Yeshi was now divorced.

When Yeshi arrived in Addis Ababa her uncle, an army colonel in the Haile Selassie government, arranged another marriage for her. She was now 18 years old, and her next husband was a businessman with whom she had two children. During this period of the early 1970s Yeshi observed that there were many poor people in the streets. Soon thereafter, Mengistu Haile Mariam came to power. With the sudden and unexpected death of her children and the political instability in Ethiopia, Yeshi’s life descended to a lower level:

All of the youth were drafted into the military. After my children died of disease I left my husband; I was 27 years and it was 1975. I hurt when my children died and I no longer wanted to stay with my husband.7

At this point, Yeshi’s uncle set her up in a bar as a prostitute:

I worked privately in my own bar, a drinking house. I sold beer . . . alcohol. In Addis this is the only way a woman can survive. My uncle gave me some money to start the business.

Presenting the Ethiopian male viewpoint, Yilma Tafere suggested that:
her uncle would have set her up because he knows she has had two husbands and “it’s a bust.” . . . So give her some money to produce local alcohol, buy honey and produce Ethiopian honey wine and encourage her.

Life for Yeshi took an upturn in 1978, however, when she became involved in politics in Addis Ababa and was elected to the regional administration, the Kebele (a committee to administer the area under orders of the government). She then joined a military camp as a cook and was relocated to south Shashemene in Shewa province for military training. For Yeshi “there was a division of labor and we were paid well.” She learned to read and write, and, along with 170 other women, worked as a cook in the camp. All lived separately in a dormitory and “some ladies met future husbands this way. . . . I stayed as a cook up to 1991 but did not meet another man.” Then, unfortunately for Yeshi, life took another downturn with the arrival of Meles Zenawi’s forces:

When Meles Zenawi came in these people were driven out. Just as I start a normal life as a cook, life comes to an end. . . . I am the last child in the family and my parents are too old and poor. . . . I am forced to flee to Kenya.

As a member of Mengistu Haile Mariam’s military forces Yeshi could not afford to remain in Ethiopia; she has ended up in a foreign refugee camp as a social outcast with no hopes of an early return to Ethiopia.

Another Ethiopian lady, Zewditu Mahmud Mahmud, who came from the town of Dembi in the western province of Ilubabor, also viewed Mengistu as “liberating.” Her parents were both Gurage from the Oromo area and she attended school until she was 13. Her parents were considered “middle class”; her father owned a “hotel” in Dembi, and after school “we, my mother and I, helped in the hotel; there was no bar.” Zewditu’s eldest sister was married at about 17 years of age, but after grade eight, Zewditu, to her horror, was informed she too was to be married. Thus, she ran away to her aunt in Shewa province in Wolkite town:
I took a bus for ten hours. . . . My aunt wanted me to be self-reliant and get educated and did not support a young marriage. My aunt quarreled with my parents because my older sister was also given in marriage against her will. . . . At that time in our town a lot of ladies were getting pregnant before marriage and my parents did not want this happening to me. . . .

Zewditu now lived with her aunt.

When she was 19, Zewditu went back to high school for six months to compete for the school-leaving exam. She then went to Sidama province in southern Ethiopia to Awasa Agricultural College (a two-year college). Her ambition was to acquire employment in the Ministry of Agriculture. By now it was the 1990s and there were 95 female freshmen in college with Zewditu:

Mengistu was good for women because if you graduated you could find a job. The government was good for women. Local politicians and the government hired women.

But Zewditu’s dream of a job in the Ministry of Agriculture did not become a reality because rebels posed a new threat to the current regime:

At the university in November 1990 Mengistu held a meeting . . . [and] talked for two to three hours regarding the current situation in Ethiopia. Half of the students attending this meeting asked for training for military service so that they could infiltrate . . . Meles Zenawi’s forces, who were near to capturing power.

 Shortly thereafter Mengistu mobilized everyone into the military:

In 1991 we were told . . . that all college students should attend military service; otherwise . . . we cannot go back to school. It was an attempt by Mengistu to increase his army before Meles [Zenawi] got there. . . . All universities closed and people were transported to military training camps. This was my first semester. After the
second semester I was sent to a military training center in Northern Omo province at Blate.

The two months of military training for Zewditu consisted of cleaning armaments and fixing guns. Ten thousand students went for military training, out of which 1,000 were women. Although trained separately from the men, many actually joined the army:

One lady was an airborne corporal and a military trainer. Ten women graduated with this lady. Her name was Maluembit and she was approximately 28 years old.

In Ethiopia at this time women were trained up to the level of majors, and Zewditu, like Misrak and Yeshi, was given political education that included socialist theory and Marxist socialist discipline:

It was strange to be trained in military education when I wanted to be an agriculturalist. But I did not finish. . . . Some of the military officers said the ladies should leave the camp and go back to their parents. Others said they should go to war. Right in the middle Mengistu fled . . . we were informed that the Meles people were in town and that we [were] in big trouble.

In May 1991 Mengistu’s forces fled as Meles Zenawi’s rebels fought their way into Addis Ababa. Many who had been forcibly conscripted into Mengistu’s army, or who like Zewditu were still in the process of training, were now forced to flee. From this point on, Zewditu’s life, along with those of many others, began to disintegrate amid the ensuing chaos:

A few buses came to get us from the camp and we reached Awasa in Sidamo. En route to Addis we were informed Meles had captured the city. . . . At that time we were taken to Awasa college for ladies. They brought an airplane and took 15 of us to Addis. The plane was filled and they tried to organize another plane for the rest of the ladies. They took us to the airstrip from the college on a bus and after that there was armed conflict between the people
who took us to the airstrip and the people already there. Big military officials were attempting to flee to Kenya with the plane. We were in big trouble. We went back to the college. There was a big military armed conflict in Awasa, and banks were robbed. We stayed in the college compound and after a day and a half we got onto another bus. We understood we were going to our parents and we were traveling day and night without realizing we were almost in Kenya. We had traveled for three days. . . . We reached Moyale near the Kenyan border at midnight. The second day the Kenyan government permitted us to cross. . . . All the ladies were in the bus and everybody was crying and disturbed. We did not know where we were being taken. The men were behind us in other buses. There were 10,000 students in buses, of which 1,000 were women.

Zewditu eventually reached Kakuma refugee camp where she joined other Ethiopian refugees.

Like Ethiopia, Somalia has also been a conflict zone for some time. As this large African nation began to disintegrate many of its women were victimized. Thus, many Somali women have also been forced to flee.

The Civil War in Somalia

For much of the outside world, Somalia has become a symbol of failure of both international peacekeeping operations and the postcolonial African state. For the Somalis themselves, their nation is an idea that has ceased to exist. Since the January 1991 overthrow of the dictatorial regime of Mohammed Siad Barre the country has been without any effective central government or formal economy. During the colonial era, when Italy and Great Britain occupied the region and most clans shunned Western education, one Somali clan group, the Mejerteen, became the most highly educated. Thus, in modern times many Mejerteen served as bureaucrats in the Siad Barre regime and hence became among the wealthiest of Somalis, but also highly unpopular. The territory has now splintered into dozens of armed factions organized on the basis of local clan loyalties that are obedient only to the law of the gun and their warlords’ own self-interest.
complexity of Somalia's numerous clan families is beyond the scope of this paper; of importance, however, is that this country continues to function as a large stateless lineage society. Somalia can be divided into two major clan families: the Isaaq and the Darod. This study concerns the Darod and specifically three of its subclans: the Marehan, the Mejerteen, and the Hawiye. The latter has had an enormous impact on the life of one Somali lady, Fatuma.9

Flight out of Somalia

Fatuma's experiences as relayed in this paper are important as an eyewitness account of women in conflict zones as well as for reflecting on Somalia from its peaceful days to its complete national disintegration decades later. Now a middle-aged but extremely attractive Somali woman, Fatuma came from the coastal town of Kismayo. A member of the Darod clan, her loyalties today are now only limited to her politically prominent Western-educated subclan, the Mejerteen. Although at present Somalia has disintegrated into a mass of clashing clan families, when Fatuma was a student in school some years ago there was no ethnic tension in Somalia:

We played: Darod, Hawiye, Shakal, Bimal, Isaaq . . . in classes we were colleagues. Some of the students went to the capital city, Mogadishu, to start secondary school and we were like brothers and sisters. Everybody was allocated to a relative and we started studying together . . . there were interclan marriages.

By 1972 Fatuma had married, given birth to one child, and then was suddenly divorced:

The problem is that divorced women are shunned. People ask “Why is this young lady divorced?” Nobody cares if the husband is very bad but they banish the woman . . . it is always the woman’s fault.

But by 1975, Fatuma, now an educated woman, was able to go to work in the Ministry of Fisheries because Kismayo had a big fishing industry. She made enough money to support both herself and her child.
At this time, however, Somalia began to experience financial troubles, which in turn brought increased political unrest. Unwisely, Siad Barre began to implement governmental policies that exploited latent clan tensions in Somalia:

Military officials were being replaced. They were from the northeastern Red Sea area, not Somaliland. This regime [of Siad Barre] dismissed all the military officials. We call this time the “days of flight.”

This period, according to Fatuma, marked the beginning of Somalia’s long-term problems:

The main slogan used to be “what do you know?” . . . ten years later it was “who do you know?” Before 1977 people had no guns. After this time guns fell into the hands of everybody and now there was a lot of shootings.

Much of the conflict in Somalia at this time, according to Fatuma, was due to the issue of unemployment. Those who had jobs “could survive” but those without were now forced to rob others. At first people were simply just robbed and “people asked me for money everyday . . . but my neighbors spoke up for me. . . . In Mogadishu I was attacked twice.”

After 1977 war between Somalia and Ethiopia broke out, exacerbating Somalia’s domestic and economic troubles. Starving and destitute people began flooding from the rural areas into the city of Mogadishu. Fatuma was still working but now food, clothes, and all human needs went up in price. Fatuma found another husband, a man who was working in the Port Authority on the Board as Director of Planning in Mogadishu. She too acquired a job working for the government in the same city. She and her husband had a second child, and a third, but their combined salaries were still not covering their needs.

In 1980 Siad Barre, who was courted by the Soviet Union and now supported a socialist philosophy, further compounded Somalia’s political and economic troubles, according to Fatuma, by favoring his own clan, the Marehan, over all others:
He called his people from the bush, nomads, and put them all in branches of the government and the military... these people came to power and replaced the previous administrators and started the "Committee of Workers." They had little schooling and only knew how to speak Somali. Civil servants knew other languages but these militia were uneducated... [and started] beating and robbing people and taking their property. You could be jailed for three years without due process and be tortured... he [Siad Barre] is Darod but his tribe [clan] is Marehan and only Marehan people were now used. The main clans are Marehan, Mejerteen, and Ogaden. People were complaining "what are you doing?"

As the situation in Somalia worsened, "people started thinking about clans and tribes." After 1980 the Mejerteen people were tortured because they were the intellectuals:

In the colonial era the Italians gave a chance to all Somalis but the Mejerteen were more open to Western education. People used to refuse to bring their daughters to school... and stated "Do you want my daughter to be a prostitute and talk to white people?" Before my generation only about ten girls got an education. But the Mejerteen got educated. I was also educated. We became the intelligentsia.

In 1982 Fatuma became seriously threatened:

People at work monitored my movements. I was accused of smuggling people out of Somalia. They jailed me for 24 days... in jail people were suffering. The family could not bring food without bribing the jailers. There were three women in prison with me; one of my tribe and the others not... My husband tried everything to get me out... This was a bad time in the country and I kept hoping the regime would be replaced.

Fatuma eventually returned to her job but two years later, in 1984, she was forced to resign; the economic situation was worsening and government staff were targeted for violence. She was afraid. Then she found
herself working at another ministry post under “illiterate Marehan people. . . . I was treated like a dog. . . . I was dismissed without retirement.”

For the next four years Fatuma invested her time in a small business in Mogadishu selling food and clothing: “We were three women and two men cooperating in Bakaro market,” and they soon started to make a profit:

We were now the biggest market in Mogadishu. We rented a big store and one lady and man were from the Hawiye clan—one man and two ladies were from the Darod. . . . Although we [were] all different clans we shared the profits according to our capital. None of us were Marehan clan. We feared them because they were looked at as the killer-agents of the government. The Marehan controlled the military and the government and did not need jobs. They now owned land cruisers and different vehicles. But we all did a good business. Some of us were selling and stayed in the store and others bought from . . . Abu Dhabi and Italy.

From the latter 1980s Somalia became even more unstable. In 1988 Siad Barre began to have trouble with the Isaaq clan, and according to Fatuma, “they [did] not like military rule. So Barre threw out the Isaaqs. They started strikes and bombed Hargeisa, Burao, Berbera.” Then in 1991 the civil war started, and “no one believed that the war would become so bad.”

The United Somali Congress, founded one year before Barre’s ouster, came to occupy a prominent position in 1990. When the party broke up the following year into the Hawiye subclans of the Haber Gidir, led by Ali Mahdi, and the Abgal, led by Mohamed Farah Aiddeed, the latter finally drove Barre from Somalia into Kenya. Internecine violence increased dramatically as did the number of deaths and displaced persons in the south.10

Tragedy now struck Fatuma when members of a militia murdered her husband the second day of the war. He had been working in Kismayo, and when he tried to return he was captured:

The militia pulled him out of the car and asked him questions. These were Aiddeed’s people; they are all illiterate nomads. They saw a beautiful car and realized he was a minister of the Barre government.
Accompanying her husband was a shikal (sheikh), a religious man. The militia demanded to know his clan. The sheikh begged them not to shoot either of them. They shot the sheikh once in the arm, shot Fatuma’s husband several times and took the car. The wounded sheikh staggered to Fatuma’s house where she dressed his arm. They agreed that the next day they would return to pick up her husband’s body:

But he did not come until the fourth day. With the help of Allah, we found many dead people in that place. There were 12 bodies and I identified my husband by the teeth and the hair because the bodies were black and bloody. I buried him in the night near the houses. It was very bad . . .

Things went from bad to worse for Fatuma and:

my colleagues of the Hawiye clan . . . they stole everything from me. In the morning after the burial my “friends” with other gunmen came to me and took the keys to my Toyota and all my money from the cooperative. All of them are dead now; killed by their own relatives. Sons kill fathers and brothers are killing brothers. There is a lack of rule, no order or police.

Eventually, Fatuma fled Mogadishu with her children for Kismayo. Amnesty International estimated that by the end of 1991 the factions representing the various Hawiye subclans based in Mogadishu had been responsible for widespread destruction, looting, and killing of unarmed civilians that left 5,000 dead and 15,000 wounded in the capital city. A more recent Africa Watch report estimated that in 1992, 41,000 were killed or wounded.11

At this time Aidid’s militia (Hawiye clan) came after Fatuma:

My father had been a prominent and well known chief and businessman in Kismayo. He had died in an accident in 1982 after emigrating to Saudi Arabia. At one point I was a store-owner so people think I still have money. The first time I gave them gold and the
second time also. Then at Kismayo [I stay three months] they came again . . .

The problem was that now Fatuma had no money for transport. In 1991 when Fatuma tried to hide from Aideed’s militia in Kismayo she was hounded:

They found me after looking from house to house, many of which were empty. I knew I was in dire trouble when they asked me, “who is your clan?” I refused to answer the question. . . . I told them I was not of the Darod clan and they caught me and tried to kill me without knowing my clan.” Someone said, “why kill this lady, she is not a man . . . she is nothing.” They checked the house . . . I had nothing. Some of the militia said, “no reason to kill her.” They left but after 11 days they came again and asked for money and said “we will kill you if you have no money” I told them, “do whatever you like because morally I am already dead!”

The next time the militia came back into town, Fatuma and the remnants of her family fled once again, this time out of Somalia:

I decided to leave but I had no money so I sold my remaining ring and necklace for transport . . . and decided to go to the border. There were two small villages . . . one in Kenya and another in Somalia. The Ogaden people started fighting and killing each other on the Somali side so we fled and ran to my daughter and cousin who were at a camp in Liboyi in Kenya.

Fatuma arrived at her first camp in Kenya, Liboyi. This was to be the first of many. Like Fatuma, many Southern Sudanese women also had harrowing journeys across the border.

The Civil War in Sudan

Sudan’s second civil war between the Muslim north and non-Muslim south has been raging since 1983, the year in which large amounts of oil
were discovered near the border in southern territory. Since the takeover of the state in 1989 by a repressive military clique allied to the fundamentalist National Islamic Front (NIF), the polarization of Sudanese society has deepened to an unprecedented extent. Further, the genocide of southern people, in an effort to pump southern oil into the northern Sudan, has involved unprecedented brutality as the land is “cleared” of all its southern inhabitants. Prior to 2004, there was little hope for unity and reconciliation among the suffering people in this vast land of enormous potential.

The war is being fought in the South and it is the women, once again, who find themselves caught between warring factions. Unfortunately, many women also became victims of the wars in Ethiopia, a place to which they had fled for security from the conflict in Sudan. Southern Sudanese women have thus not only been subjected to a longer conflict, but also victimized by the events of civil wars in two countries.

**Flight from South Sudan**

Most women from South Sudan have been forced to flee their home territories because of slave raids and violent attacks by government-sponsored Islamic Baggara militias. Many initially ran hundreds of miles from the northwestern southern Sudan east to Ethiopia. According to Rebecca Abuk Deng, a Malwal Dinka:

I stayed in the village and never saw the town... The daughter of my aunt was taken by Murahaleen [government militias]. Then they took my brother who was 25 by force to put in the Khartoum army. My sister was killed after chasing after her stolen child. They killed my husband also. I remained with my five children and then ran... to Itang [in Ethiopia].

Of the thousands fleeing to Ethiopia, many died en route. For Malwal Dinka Martha Nyedier Akok it took three months to reach the camp of Itang across the Sudanese border in Ethiopia. She was traveling with her six children and her husband and was carrying *dhurra* (grain). When the food was finished,
We ate groundnuts and grass in the road like animals; we ate the leaves of trees and many people died but we kept going. The lions came up to us; we had no power to run or protect others so the lions ate us... Many people were so hungry they slept under the trees and died.

Of the 4,000 who left the Malwal Dinka country with Martha in 1983, approximately 2,000 made it; the others died of thirst, hunger, and lion attacks. When a child died in the arms of his or her mother, according to Martha, “you throw it ‘like this’” (motions to throw it away like a paper cup).

But for the Sudanese in the south, conditions in Ethiopia were also very difficult. Martha Nyedier Akok states:

When we reached Ethiopia we had many problems. Itang had no food from the beginning. We ate grass and snakes. When woman made alcohol we ate the remains of what was left... When Mengistu and the United Nations were organized we got a hut and bed and blankets.

But even in Ethiopia life became violence-ridden and insecure within a few years. In 1991, at the fall of Ethiopia’s leader Mengistu Haile Mariam, who had supported the southern rebel movement the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), Ethiopian support for these refugees quickly evaporated. The new leader, Meles Zenawi, supported the Sudanese government from the north against the Sudanese resistance army in the south. Hence, Ethiopian soldiers then pursued refugees from southern Sudan, most of whom were women, at gunpoint across the borders back into Sudan. According to Grace Isaiah Piel, a Bor-Gok Dinka “We remained in Itang until 1991. ... [Then] soldiers came into the camp with guns and they bombed the camp. We ran to Punyudu.” Similarly, Bor Dinka Suzanne Gordon Kuol states:

When I was at Itang my husband had come back to the camp. But the Ethiopians started shooting men and women and my husband
was killed. Everyone divided and people were scattering. Some went to Nasir and others to Bor, and on to Punyudu and Fashala [Pachala].

Those who survived the harrowing flight back into Sudan faced further near-death experiences. For Martha Nyedier Akok this event was the worst:

The Ethiopians wanted to kill us, the Nuer [historical enemies of the Dinka] wanted to kill us, and then the Anyuak [also historical enemies of the Dinka] wanted to kill us. They would beg and if you said “no!” they would kill you and take your luggage. Now I gave birth to twins on the road. . . . I did the birth myself. I had one girl and one boy. . . . This was 1991, May 23rd. I did not know what to do with the twins. I put them in a box which I exchanged with the Nuer for my clothes and went naked. These were the Gaajak Nuer in Ethiopia. They are normally hostile to the Dinka. When we reached the river Geilo we stayed on the river banks where water runs very quickly. It was the rainy season. Then the Ethiopian guerrillas came and chased the Sudanese refugees into the water. None of us knew how to swim. . . . Many children were thrown into the river . . . ladies, small children; they died in the river. They were shooting us. Me, I was carrying my children. . . . and we grabbed hold of ropes falling from trees to stop us going down the river.

As the hounded refugees struggled down the Geila river from Ethiopia back into South Sudan they became wedged between the forces of the Khartoum government and those of the Ethiopians. Chaos ensued, and Martha states:

People were now stuck in the middle. Many died in the water; many pregnant women aborted and went into shock. We ran among the enemies like animals. When we reached Fashala [Pachala, in Sudan] there was no food; we were alone. . . . We tried to cook soup with leaves of trees. . . . Those that had clothes sold them to the Anyuak for sorghum or maize. Two days later the airplanes came
again and bombed the people in the town... two or three times a
day. Many died from hunger and bombs.

In June of that year another woman from South Sudan, a Bari, Lilian
Dudu Jackson Kisanga, was one of the lucky ones to survive the
Ethiopian expulsion:

In June 1991 we rushed to Fashala [Pachala] chased by the
Ethiopians... who feared the Sudanese would defend [Mengistu
Haile] Mariam. We left Fashala in June and then... the Khartoum
government and the Ethiopian forces attacked Fashala. In
December the SPLA [Sudan People’s Liberation Army] defended
the town but in February they were defeated... and everyone was
scattered throughout Pibor and Bor.

Eventually Martha, Lilian, and others ran to Kapoeta in the southern
part of South Sudan where they were now at the mercy of more South
Sudan enemies, recently armed by the northern Sudanese government,
the martial Toposa. They too attacked the women. Soon after, the
Sudanese government began bombing and “lots of people were dying.”

At this point rumors of a safe haven in Kenya reached many women.
According to Abuor Gordon Nhial, a Bor Dinka:

[In Narus], when we got the message that Khartoum [northern
Sudan government] was attacking we heard rumors, through the
SPLA [that] there was a refugee camp in Kenya and its government
would protect us on the road with the Red Cross. They did and they
supplied water and food. When we got to Lokichoggio [in Kenya]... we
were the second group to arrive. They could take three families if
big, or seven families if small, in a car up to Kakuma Refugee Camp.

Thus many southern women continued running towards Narus in the far
South Sudan while others, to the west, fled across the Ugandan border.
Eventually Martha Nyedier Akok and an Atwot, Mary Benjamin Dhal,
settled in Kakuma Refugee Camp in October 1994. Martha had seen four
of her children die and lost her mother and sister. These migration routes
were used by numerous fleeing southern Sudan women. Many never made it to the camp, however; they died en route of hunger, thirst, attacks by wild animals, and incessant bombings by the Sudanese government.

Life in Kenya moreover was hardly a safe haven. Unlike the Sudanese from the south, the Somali and Ethiopian female refugees did not reach Kakuma immediately. Most began refugee life in other camps that were badly run and very unsafe.

**Refugee Life in Kenya and “Living Badly”**

Refugee camps in Kenya were a rude awakening for many women who had recently crossed the border. Most camps had few facilities, largely because they were considered “transit camps”—camps set up for temporary housing of refugees who, it was assumed, would soon return home. Even worse, the camps were particularly dangerous places for women. Thus refugees were shifted from one camp to another around Kenya in quick succession.

When Zewditu Mahmud Mahmud gained access into Kenya after fleeing the chaos in Ethiopia, her real nightmare began. When given asylum by the Kenyan government the male refugees, who were armed, handed their equipment over to the Kenyan police at the border. Some men had money to buy food, but only shared it with the women in return for sexual favors:

*We were told we would be given a better place and protected, but we found the opposite. We stayed in the bus for a very long time with no food or water. . . . Some men bought food with their own money and this situation brought the ladies to be dependent on men economically and physically. In order to eat and drink and to fulfill basic necessities we have to obey men against our will. . . . The women feel very unprotected.*

Eventually the Ethiopian refugees in the bus were transferred to a transitional camp called Oda, 12 kilometers from the Ethiopian border. There, women acquiring any water for either drinking or washing faced a dangerous challenge:
When we would go to fetch water some of the women were raped. To deal with this problem we all went for water in groups of seven or eight to protect ourselves. . . . We had no formal procedure for a complaint of rape. If you were beaten there was nothing you could do. If there is a whole family in the camp they may follow it up legally. But at Oda we were totally alone. During menstruation we had no underwear. . . . We could not go out but had to stay in our tent until that day passed.

At Oda, six to eight Ethiopian refugee women were assigned to each tent.

After a period the Ethiopian refugees were shifted to another camp, Walda, 125 kilometers from the Ethiopian border. Located near the village of Sololo, it was a violently hot and humid desert, and many women remained for two years. Those women who had shared the same tents in Oda now remained together at Walda, and Zewditu now joined up with six friends who had been together in Oda. Walda at least had some facilities, including a clinic. Water could be accessed that was closer to the tents, but “rapes continued to occur.”

Soon, however, Zewditu found herself with less of a support network when four women returned to Ethiopia, leaving only two: “Their parents came and took them.” She and her companion did not know each other until they arrived at the camp, and “I was afraid to go back because I no longer knew my family.” Now the real pressures of camp life took their toll on Zewditu:

The two of us had problems. All the women living alone needed to find a “husband.” It was hardship to live alone . . . my friend was raped by two military men . . . another had a relationship willingly with my friend . . . they were just sexual friends. Women use the calendar system to avoid pregnancy. I remained alone. Another male friend is always asking me to have sex but I refuse. Then the parents of my friend came and got her.

With the loss of all her female friends Zewditu was now completely alone and really afraid for good reason:
I [was] now 21 years. There were two ladies nearest to my tent. We all cooked together. No one from my family came to take me back. . . . I have no idea where they are. . . . Then I was beaten badly and then this soldier raped me . . . an Ethiopian soldier. At that time I was ashamed to tell anyone. My friends found me and carried me to the campus hospital. I got treatment for the beating but not for the rape. I was ashamed to mention it and I do not know the law here for assistance of rape of women.

Eventually, Zewditu was taken to one of the ladies’ tents, but after that the man who had raped her came to her tent and stole what few belongings she had. Then he returned to Ethiopia: “He is afraid he will be charged for this so he fled . . . rape in Ethiopia is treated like murder—it is a serious crime [7 to 15 years].”

After a time the few females left, including Zewditu, decided to “marry” someone who could “try his best to protect me and comfort me.” Zewditu and her male companion lived together for one year. In this instance, if a child was born to any of the women, he or she remained with the mother until eight years of age. At that point, under Ethiopian law, which was partially observed although the refugees were in Kenya, the child would pass into the legal custody of the father, who would be expected to contribute to the child’s welfare. Zewditu stayed with her boyfriend for one year, but suddenly he too returned to Ethiopia, saying, “I will be back; but he never showed up. . . . I never heard from him again.”

In the meantime, the refugees at Walda were still unsafe because of ongoing kidnappings and murders by Meles Zenawi’s men, who cut through the forest, which was only 30 kilometers or a three-hour walk from the border. Because of the high number of murders the Walda facility closed. Once again the refugees were herded onto buses to another camp.

Much like the female Ethiopian refugees, Somali refugees were also shuttled from one camp to another in quick succession. When Fatuma was in the process of fleeing Somalia she was first placed in a Kenyan refugee camp at Liboyi. She had brought with her a small female orphan baby, whom she picked up under a tree in Somalia before she crossed
the border. The child acquired yellow jaundice, however, and after ten
months she died because Liboyi camp had no real medical facilities.
Soon thereafter Fatuma acquired some transport and with friends
bribed the Kenyan officials to allow them to go to Nairobi. There she
acquired assistance from an aunt who gave her money. In January 1992
she was relocated to a camp in Thika. Many refugee women who
arrived in Thika Refugee Camp near Nairobi had access to so little med-
ical attention that their young children and babies died.17 A year later
Thika was closed, and Fatuma and all the other refugees were moved to
Riuro.

Finally, in May 1995 the Somali and Ethiopian refugees were relocated
to Kakuma Refugee Camp. Of all the refugee camps in Kenya, Kakuma
showed signs of becoming a permanent residence for some, although,
according to Zewditu, “when we arrived here it was scary and terrible.”

Kakuma: The End of the Line

Kakuma Refugee Camp was conceived in 1992 when Deng Dau Deng, a
Bor Dinka veteran of the civil war in South Sudan, visited this territory
with a member of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.
Kakuma lies in the northwestern Kenyan desert, which is a very humid
but dry and windswept region. The only plants that survive are thorny
bushes and a smattering of African flat-topped trees. Originally sparsely
populated, the territory had been home to a pastoralist Kenyan people,
the Turkana. The camp was planned to be six kilometers long and two
kilometers wide and lay wedged between two dry river beds. Deng Dau
Deng later became the chairman of all of the Dinka in Kakuma, and he
has continued to hold this post in recent years.

Soon thereafter, in 1996, the camp’s inmates came to include
Ethiopian and Somali refugees as well as others from troubled neigh-
bor ing countries. At this time a total of 47,000 souls were housed in this
windswept land adjacent to the Kenyan town of Kakuma. Of these,
2,813 were Ethiopians, 1,349 were Somalis, and 43,000 were Sudanese,
the great majority Dinka.

In 1999, the U.S. Committee for Refugees calculated that Sudan had
4 million displaced persons; by 2000, the refugee population at Kakuma
stood at over 110,000. Most of the inhabitants continued to be Sudanese. Smaller numbers came from Somalia, Ethiopia, and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{18}

Locationally, the Sudanese Dinka housed themselves as far as possible from other refugees, and five kilometers from the central camp authorities to the north. The Somalis were placed to the east and the Ethiopians came to reside in the northeast of the United National High Commission for Refugees base. Thus, each ethnic community occupied a separate and somewhat discrete location. Each “neighborhood” built its own market stands, coffee shops, library, and places of worship. Nevertheless, irrespective of the ethnic origin of the women who eventually made their way to this camp, all continued to experience violence.

**Violence at Kakuma Refugee Camp**

Much as in all the other camps in Kenya, at Kakuma violence against women became an everyday occurrence and went unchecked for nearly a decade. The camp authorities believed the violence was purely political. According to a Ugandan Lutheran World Federation employee, Nuwa Senkebe, “there are many family conflicts in the camp; [they] are actually an excuse to vent political feelings.”

The perceptions of camp personnel may not have been the key, however, to the ongoing violence. Part of the trouble of residing in a refugee camp in a foreign country is that strict cultural rules of the former homeland can fall by the wayside. When one Somali female refugee, Fatuma, arrived in Kakuma she was constantly on the alert for violence by Somali men, particularly towards her daughters: “I worried they would be raped.” Yet, in prewar Somalia she would never have had such fears.

Some women took “husbands” to protect them but they still faced violence. According to another Ethiopian woman who paired off with a man:

I do not want to be married to him and this is not a good place to raise children . . . and I want to be self reliant. I do not love him but I need him to protect me . . . But after a few months I found I have menstrual disturbances and he became suspicious of me . . . he thought I was having an affair and this has broken our relationship . . . He beat
me and because of this I became sick, seriously. . . . I left this man and I have faced a lot of problems and I was not happy to be separated from him. The community leadership has not treated me properly. . . . The local refugee court is supposed to officially separate us but I am not married and he chased me out of my house. The court has given me no support and they told me to go back to him . . . and said if I want to be separated from him not to take anything. So I left with nothing. I took my nightgown and he has all my clothes and belongings. I am now living with a lady friend.

Women who are raped are rewarded by being shunned by society as well as by their husbands. In 1996 while this researcher was in Kakuma camp, a Somali female was raped brutally and another female claimed:

Life is very difficult in this camp in our culture. It is very bad if a woman is raped because people feel it is the fault of the woman and then they are discriminated against and then they cannot get a husband.

If a married woman is raped, she is sometimes abandoned because it is assumed she has a virus. According to one Catholic Sister, Mary Ellen, a number of women have venereal diseases. Others have performed abortions on themselves with coat hangers. Others take malaria tablets to get rid of unwanted pregnancies because an unmarried pregnant Somali “cannot be accepted in Somali culture,” and “this society is intolerant of women who are raped and they have little compassion.” Some married women had husbands who abandoned them after they were raped. Periodically, men who go to Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, find new women there and abandon their wives and children altogether. According to Somali informant Fatuma, “In the old days this never happened. A husband could not abandon a woman without an official divorce. But we have no money, food is too little, and we cannot even help our relatives.”

However, a difference between the Sudanese, most of whom are Dinka and Nuer, and the Somali and Ethiopian women is that the former are primarily widows forced to fend for themselves. Many are
devoid of any close family members and dependent on distant kinfolk. This situation is unprecedented in Southern Sudanese society. The Dinka and Nuer are lineage societies with extensive kin networks, but so many have died that a number of females are virtually isolated for the first time in their lives.

According to Human Rights Watch, South Sudanese female orphans are far more depressed than their male counterparts in Kakuma. A report of a child welfare specialist in 2000 noted that very many girls suffered from some form of sexual abuse, and a number were living continually in severely abusive situations. Distant relatives, in a bid to collect bridewealth, were marrying off young girls to those willing to promise to make the payments. Abusive situations intensified because many young girls wanted to attend the school provided at Kakuma. One such female, Yar Rachel Aluong, arrived in Kakuma in 1992. She was (to use the Human Rights Watch term) “fostered” to a family who “sold her off” against her will in 1993 (meaning she was married against her will so that her distant supervising relatives could acquire bridewealth). She had a seven-year-old child from her husband who was extremely physically abusive. Yar possessed a long thick scar on her neck from his beatings. According to Human Rights Watch, Yar went on a hunger strike in an attempt to leave her distantly related kinfolk, with whom she continued to live because not all the bridewealth had yet been paid. As a result she was placed in the Sudanese jail at Kakuma. Originally established to handle criminals within the Sudanese community, the jail in recent years has also become a place for those girls who violate cultural norms, including the abandonment of their husbands without permission of the extended family. Once confined in jail, Yar was given two options: return to your husband or be beaten until you decide to return. When the Human Rights Watch report was written, Yar had become suicidal. External factors have also exacerbated the lives of women.

**Tensions between Muslims and Christians**

Kakuma has a number of Christian missionaries who have been present in the camp since its inception. Their presence has brought about tensions
within the Muslim refugee community. When two Somali families converted to Christianity, the wife was beaten and raped in the Ifo section of the camp. A brother and sister who were living together also converted to Christianity; unfortunately, when the brother won resettlement in Canada, his sister was left behind in camp, totally abandoned. According to one Somali female informant “she is living badly.” Further, single Somali women who are Muslim and socialize in any fashion with Christian males (Ethiopian or Dinka) are accused of “being loose.” Thus, if a Somali woman has no husband “it is very hard.”

Men also have their complaints. From one Ethiopian male’s viewpoint: “There are no women in the camp. I don’t know how long I can stay like this. I can marry here, but [what] is the future of this situation. I have nothing to offer and I fear loss of my bodily functions.”

A number of Ethiopian women have returned to Ethiopia, but not all have been successful; some in fact have been forced to return to Kakuma.

Attempts to Return Home

The Sudanese and Somali civil wars have abated, while Ethiopia has acquired some measure of peace. Nevertheless, some Ethiopian women are forced to remain refugees. One such woman, Mercy, tried to go home after residing at the camp at Walda. Upon returning to Ethiopia, she was greeted by her enraged father and thrown out of the house. “Why did you run away?” he said. “I don’t want to see you anymore!” Now, back in Kakuma, she is considered a prostitute. According to Zewditu, “I do not know what will happen to me if I go back [to Ethiopia]. I do not know if I can find my family safely. I am still trying to attend all training within the camp [at Kakuma]. I am hoping UNHCR [the United Nations High Commission for Refugees] can help me with education and to live in a better place than this.”

Some measure of relief may be forthcoming for the seemingly permanent female occupants of this camp. In 2001 the Lutheran World Federation (which runs Kakuma), along with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, recommended that the camp be reoriented from “relief” to “prolonged development.” The recommendation also
acknowledged that refugees deserve a measure of personal safety and security. Whether these suggestions are followed remains to be seen.

**Conclusion**

This paper has presented the voices of women from three conflict zones—Ethiopia, Somalia, and South Sudan—living in Kenyan refugee camps up to 2001. I suggest that many women fleeing the conflicts in their home countries face equally violent trauma in foreign lands. Rather than being placed in “safe havens,” they are commonly subjected to rapes, beatings, and murders. Frequent attacks on female refugees can be attributed partly to the changes that take place in the core relationships between women and men of the same country in a foreign refugee camp. Further, the legal and societal rules and laws that prevail in the home country break down. Thus, ironically, when female refugees flee civil wars in their own countries across borders into neighboring territories, they often find themselves in either a far more insecure environment or an equally violent situation. Women’s personal accounts of these violent episodes in refugee camps are rarely heard; few are able to express their viewpoints or convey their histories of recent violence to the authorities. Aid personnel and camp authorities rarely listen to women because they are overwhelmed with providing basic necessities. Further, the men of the refugee communities become the spokespersons for the entire community. Thus, many refugee women lead lives of fear and isolation while living in exile.

**Notes**

1. Field notes of the author. Research for this paper was conducted in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Northwest Kenya, from January to April 1996.

In September 2000, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was indicted in a report concerning displaced Burundian women in Tanzanian refugee camps who experienced widespread sexual and domestic abuse. See “Tanzania, UNHCR Indicted Over Violence Against Women...


5. The Ethiopians in this paper were interviewed with the aid of Yilma Tafere.

6. In northern Ethiopia, according to Ethiopian Amhara informant Yilma Tafere, it is typical for a female in a village to get married at nine years old, as “they are often fed well so that they grow faster physically and can quickly be married.”

7. It is more probable here that her husband divorced her.

8. In actuality she meant a restaurant that has a bar.

9. Fatuma requested that the rest of her name not be mentioned as she is well-known and her family is very prominent in Somalia.


12. This is because, although all parties involved were Darod, the subclans of Aideed’s Marchan despised Fatuma’s clan, the Mejerteen, because they were the former intelligentsia who had served under the fallen dictator Siad Barre. Further, the Mejerteen were perceived to still have much of the country’s wealth.

13. Although she was in fact of the Darod, had she admitted as much, she would then have had to admit she was Mejerteen, which would have most certainly brought about her hasty death.


16. Yilma Tafere, personal interview.

17. Anonymous Somali female informant, personal interview.


